



# ANTHROLOGATIONS



The Magazine of Anthropomorphic Dramatic Fiction

Issue #4

July, 2001

## *And In The Morning...*

By Kashra

Illustrated by  
Chris Goodwin

Plus Stories By:  
Michael H. Payne  
Jim Doolittle  
J. Scott Rogers  
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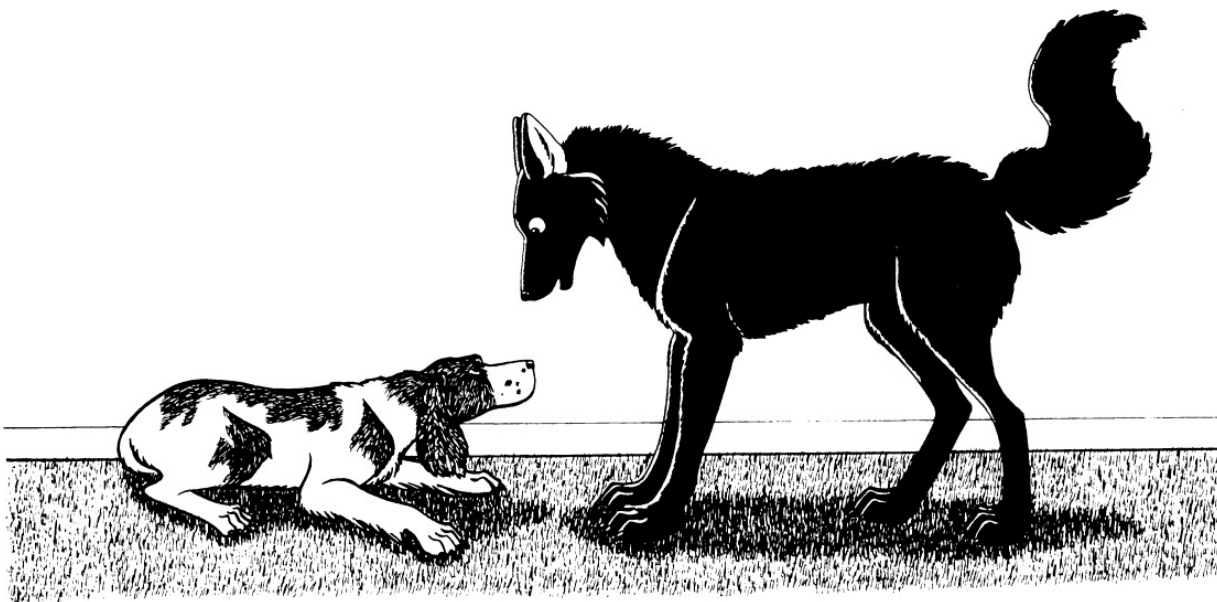


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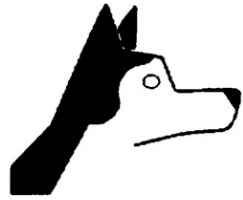
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**SOFAWOLF  
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# **About Us**

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Anthrolations is published approximately twice a year by Sofawolf Press. We welcome submissions of original first-run fiction which features anthropomorphic or zoomorphic characters and explores their interaction with the characters around them. The optimum story will be 3,000 to 5,000 words – but longer or shorter stories are happily considered, depending on available space. Anthrolations also welcomes artists interested in preparing illustrations for accepted stories.

For more information about our guidelines and submission rates, please refer to the Sofawolf Press web site.

## **Subscriptions**

We regret that we are unable to handle subscriptions at this time. Anthrolations will be available for purchase at some conventions, or via mail order. See the Sofawolf Press web site for details.





## Notes from the Editor's Desk

Welcome to Issue #4 of Anthrolations! Before I get into some juicy tidbits about the issue you hold in your hands, I'd like to take a moment to note the passing of a tradition.

I was saddened, this January, to hear of the dissolution of one of my long-time favorite magazines in the anthropomorphic genre. Pawprints Fanzine was one of the first collections of stories I chanced to read in this fandom, and it opened my eyes to some of the untapped writing potential to be found there. It was unique, both in its dedication to making more room for stories than artwork, and in its all-ages rated subject matter. I decided to found Anthrolations with the hope of providing stories of an edgier nature a forum as superlative as Pawprints.

I wish Mr. Wong, Mr. Greywolf, and the entire staff at Pawprints all the best in their future projects. Thank you for the many hours of enjoyable reading we all enjoyed under your editorial guidance.

On a less solemn note, I'd also like to express special gratitude to a couple of people who were of invaluable assistance in getting this issue to print. J. Scott Rogers stepped it up a notch when he was most needed, moving from the proofreading team to a full-fledged submissions editor. This took

some of the pressure off Tim Susman and I; allowing him to focus on the chief editorial duties of his forthcoming book "Breaking the Ice", and allowing me to spend some time on the layout and design of HistoriMorphs. It is thanks, in part, to him that I managed to get this issue out the door on time. Andrea Adams donated some of her time to helping out on proofreading, as well as working with Tim on some of our sales and marketing angles.

Mr. Susman, as usual, has been helpful beyond my capacity to describe in words. Every editor should have a team as good as I.

But you came here for good stories, and I hope you will not be disappointed. Our lead story heralds the return of Kashra to Anthrolations with a dark tale of urban blight, illustrated by Christopher "Paf" Goodwin. Then, staffer J. Scott Rogers tells us to "Do Unto Others" in a somewhat brighter contemporary urban fantasy. We were lucky to talk Ms. Amy Fennell into providing the illustrations, and they are superb!

Melissa Pinol gives us a short tale that should be familiar to anyone who shares their life with a mischievous canine. Karena Kliefoth returns for her fourth appearance and provides the illustrations. Our centerpiece story, "Canis Major" is by Tor novelist Michael H. Payne – illustrated by Kylen Miles. I was delighted to receive this story from Mr. Payne, and even more pleased to see the excellent work Ms. Miles did from it.

Fellow publisher Jim Doolittle takes time out from his web'zine Flayrah ([www.flayrah.com](http://www.flayrah.com)) to give us "Dogs", which examines the human/canine bond in a different environment. The talented Cara Mitten returns to give us a look into his world, and maybe give it a look back. Last, but certainly not least, we close this issue with a story of a more traditional fantasy nature by Kerry "Jalin" Vernon, illustrated by Lonnie DiNello.

Meanwhile, Sofawolf Press is also delighted to be rolling out the premiere issue of HistoriMorphs, edited and produced by Lanny Fields. This new magazine features stories combining anthros and humans in tales taken from real historical events. The first issue takes us to ancient Greece, off the coast of Ecuador with Captain Drake, to Boston during the American Revolution, to Maryland during the Civil War, to coastal North Carolina in 1903, and to Germany just before, and just after World War II. Six fantastic stories with equally impressive illustrations, and a full-color cover by Steve

Gallacci. It's a bold new entry onto the anthropomorphic literature scene, and we're delighted to be a part of bringing it to you.

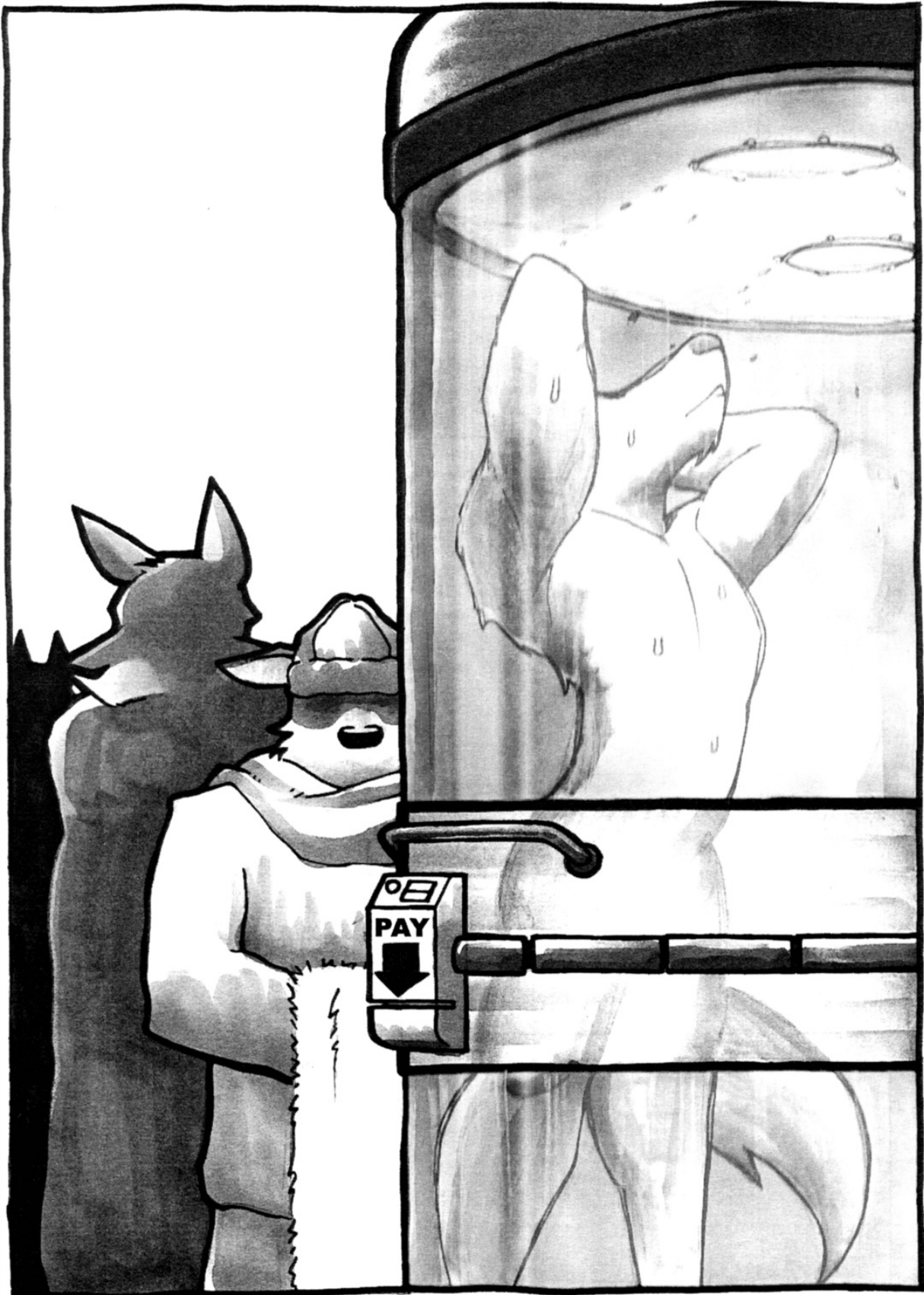
Coming this winter is "Breaking the Ice", a trade paperback collection of stories taking place on the frozen mining planet of New Tibet. Tim Susman is chief editor of this project which he conceived and produced. Definitely keep an eye out for announcement of the release date, because it's going to be a good one!

Enjoy Issue #4 of Anthrolations, and I look forward to seeing you again in Issue #5!



# **And in the Morning...**

**Kashra**



...I'd wash it all away. The filth of this city, worked so deeply into my fur from the day before, would slip helplessly down to the grime-covered tiles. The dirt in my soul would follow it, swirling around in the reddish-brown whirlpool that formed around the drain before disappearing forever down that inky hole.

The timer counted down steadily as I finished lathering the cheap shampoo down my legs. A minute left before the leader of the grumbling line nearby would take my place. I straightened up, pointing my short muzzle at the spout that cleansed me, feeling the water spatter against my face coolly, running over my eyes and lips just as the lock on the stall door buzzed open and the flow came to an abrupt halt.

I sighed and stepped outside, streams spilling off of my matted fur to the steely cold floor. My eyes met the annoyed look of the wolven creature who's turn it was next. I smiled wryly before grabbing a towel off the rack.

I'd pay for more than five minutes if I could afford it. The cold shiver that traced down my spine in the short moments between when the water stopped and the toweling began served to remind me of that fact every day. Water came at a high premium for mongrels such as myself. The public shower was reasonable, and it served my purpose, but I hated it all the same.

I dressed into my daily uniform in the common room. They called it that out of practicality, I suppose. It was a room — in that it had four walls, a floor, and a ceiling — and it was certainly common; anyone could come in and out as they pleased. There were racks along the wall to hang clothes, and a small radio buzzed with the news in the corner every morning. Nobody seemed to have the heart to steal it. Maybe it made us all feel as if we had something more than we did.

It droned on about some murder here or there, about the futile attempts of incompetent police to track down the killer, about how human men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five were advised to stay out of this region. I shook my muzzle slowly as I buttoned my pants together. Humans should stay out of this region altogether. After all, we animals can be dangerous.

Beyond the bare steel door was the city. Cold and featureless, I preferred the door's visage to what lay outside. I zipped up the front of my dingy gray uniform and pressed my thumb against the locking-pad. The hiss of metal sliding against itself resounded through the room as the door opened, and I stepped outside.

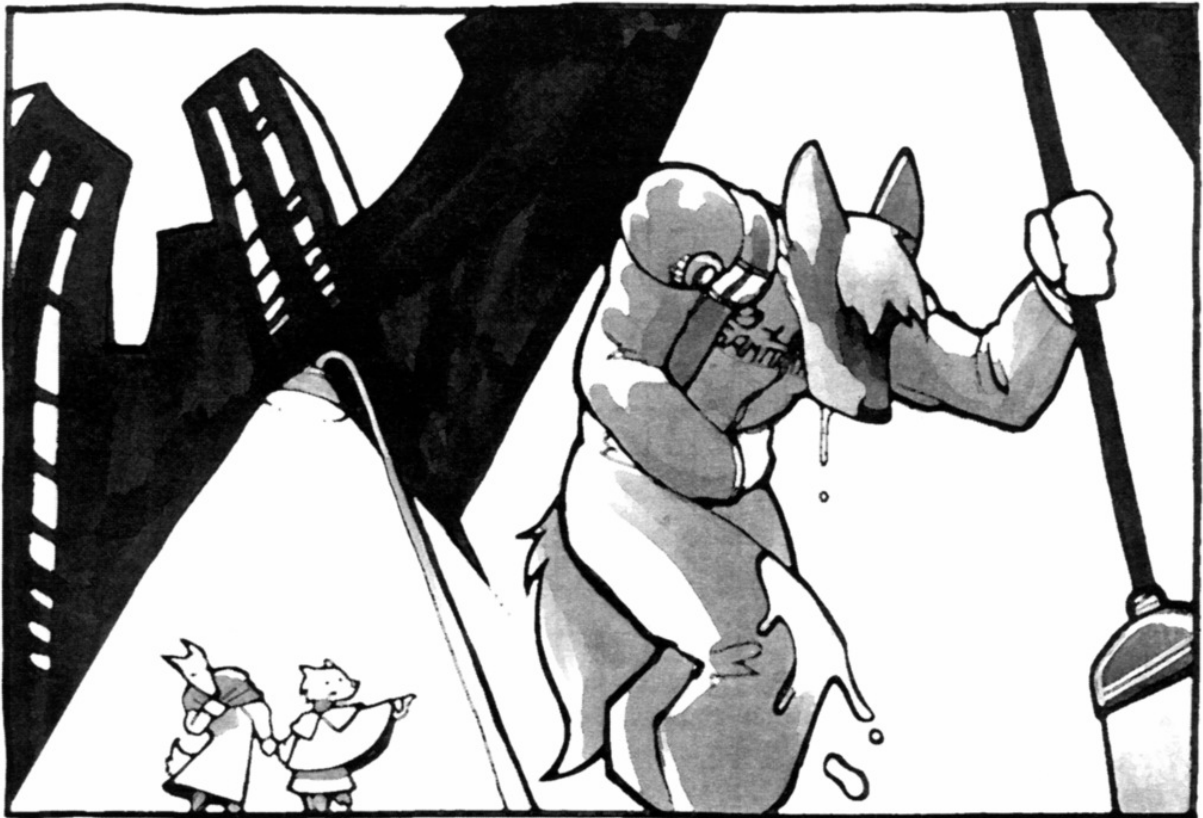
I was a cleaner. My life's work amounted to that. My job was to mop, sweep, and collect off the streets the excrement of the tall, ominous buildings that surrounded me. I was meant to make this slum someplace presentable, so that when the human inhabitants of the upper levels came down to check on us, they wouldn't have to worry about health codes or living conditions. The city kept me in employment, and it brought in enough for me to support myself; enough to take that shower every morning.

The upper levels were what we called the city we couldn't see. The lower levels were what they called... well I don't figure they called it anything. Personally, I doubted that many of them even remembered us down here. Between the two worlds there was the Wall: a thick haze of smog that swirled in a chaotic mess above our ears. The upper level, to me, was just a rumor. I believed in it just because the humans had to come from somewhere, and their pale, pink skin would have long ago turned a different hue down here.

Not that our worlds never met, mind you. A couple of 'animals' managed to find jobs on the upper level, where the air was — according to them — so easy to breath that you'd feel lightheaded.

Of course, there were men that ventured down to us as well. These were the real sickos, the ones we all despised. They didn't come because they had to; they came because they wanted to. They lived their peaceful, common lives up above the Wall, and at night they'd descend. An infestation, they'd creep through us, looking for a brothel or a bar or, if they were particularly sick, a young boy or girl for the night. But they all had the same need, and they knew we needed the money more than we needed our pride.

I grimaced as I swept a set of stray cigarette butts from the corner of a building. It was happening again. I could feel my insides churn, and a sharp pain coursed through my belly and up the front of my chest. The broom clattered to the ground between my knees as I clutched at myself, my eyes squeezing shut from the pain.



I crouched against the ground, feeling my lungs close up as if a fist had clenched around my entire form. I gasped, my tongue catching in my muzzle as nothing I would do could force another breath down my throat. No matter how many times it happened, I could never stop the dreadful feeling of death creeping closer and closer to me as I uselessly gripped my stomach in my paws.

I felt the wetness welling up in the back of my throat, as it often did. Warm and salty, it flushed forward over my tongue in a painful hack. The sidewalk became a work of modern art; dark crimson streaks appearing on the rough cement as I drew in a long needed breath, only to cough it back out with another load of my own blood.

A mother drew her daughter in closer to her as they passed me. I looked sideways into the young girl's eyes, making my best attempt to smile while the bout of coughing receded. I could feel a thick stream slipping from the corner of my lips as I did so, and knew what a frightening sight I must have been. Still, I was alive, and had made it through another fit.

I waited a while longer, shivering and staring at the small pool I had formed on the cement. The mother and child had long passed, but their



images lingered. She had glared at me as if I would eat her daughter whole. Me, one of her own kind, who cared enough to give the child a smile, even though it could have been my last moment on this god-forsaken planet. What could we ever do about the humans if we were still afraid of each other?

I stood up and wiped my lips clean, picking up the broom. No sense worrying about it now, when there was nothing I could do. A heavy sigh, and I was back to work as usual. My friends often said I should see a doctor about my condition. It seemed serious enough, and I was meant to live at least a couple more years if I was healthy. When it came down to it, though, it would be well over a month's salary — for an animal, at least — to afford a checkup, let alone treatment for whatever it was. I'd just have to live and hope for the best.



My day ended at eight. After that, it was only an hour or two before nightfall. I called it night simply because that was when the humans started to come. Down on the lower level, the streetlights were always on, and the sun was a legend. I would spend most of my time on Lawrence Drive,

loitering, having a drink, rolling with friends if I was lucky. Enough to keep me occupied, at least.

I'd watch the men walk by, knowing their destination better than they did themselves. There was a well-known brothel just a block down from my favorite bar, but most of them wouldn't know about it until it came up and bit them — or licked them, if that wasn't their kink.

Most were the kind you'd expect to be doing that sort of thing: short-stature, balding perhaps, bachelors because they have no other choice, and sexually frustrated. They were the type that didn't care who it was, or what it was, as long as it did what they told it to do. For the most part, they were harmless, worthless people, and I didn't care much about them.

The others, though, were the ones that caught my attention. You could spot one a mile away. They wore expensive raincoats, walked a certain way, just had that look about them. These men had the money, the cars, and all the tail they could get, without having to buy it. And yet, they still came down here, braving the dirty roads to search us out.

These were the men I watched for. They came here to feed something secret inside of themselves, to search for something they can't find on the upper level. They came because they wanted us, specifically. They wanted a little wolf boy, a vixen, or maybe a cougar to do their bidding. These were the type that sickened me, but they paid far better than the others.

Leaning against a dim lamppost in front of the bar I frequented, I spotted one as he crossed an alley across the street. It was past midnight, and I didn't care to be up much later tonight. This one would be it, then. I waited for him to cross half of the next block before I followed. It was always better not to call attention to yourself.

I approached him quietly, head and ears lowered and paws buried deep in my pockets. By the time I was close I knew he had noticed me, but that was all part of the plan. He slowed his gait, allowing me to pad up next to him. Neither of us looked at the other.

"Fifty?" I mumbled, staring through narrowed eyes at my feet as they scuffed along the ground.

"For the night?" he replied, his voice husky.

"Three hours, and then I have to sleep."

"Forty then."

"You have a place?" I asked, accepting the offer.

"No." he growled. "This alley up here. Good a place as any."

I hesitated. I figured they liked that, even though I was more than sure of myself. "Sure, sir. Wherever you'd like." I mumbled. My nightly routine sometimes disgusted even myself, but some things had to be done, and far be it from me to say no to opportunity.



I was quick with my work, and only rarely would I ever have to stay out the entire three hours. I arrived home around two in the morning. I closed the door behind me, flicking on the unshaded lamp that served to illuminate the small room I rented. A humble bed, a closet, a table with a pack of cards laid out in a game of solitaire, an old TV from the late nineties, and a couple pairs of socks and underwear strewn about here and there comprised my net worth.

I always felt especially dirty when I got home, knowing what I had done. I stretched out on my bed, kicking my feet over the edge and flipping on the television to the 24-hour news. I licked my lips, reaching out to the table where the box for the cards lay closed, grabbing it and flipping it open.

The dank scent of money greeted my nose as I sniffed it carefully, enjoying the intoxicating feeling of holding the thick wad of bills in my paws. I pulled it out, adding the five twenties to the roll — it wasn't hard to take your own tip after you were done with those types. I furrowed my brow as the weather passed by on the television, counting up the money I had collected. I certainly had enough to pay next month's rent. I smiled as my fingers continued along the bills. There was more than I had expected, but I was the type that always had trouble spending it. Maybe I would pay the doctor a visit, someday.

The news update began, and I closed the box as the familiar, chubby pink face of the late night newswoman popped onto the screen. My head rested against my pillow, and my eyes drooped tiredly shut, listening to the pleasant hum of her voice as I did every night, reciting the most urgent news of the day as I drifted off to sleep.

"...and this just in. Another human body was discovered tonight in the lower level. Police say that the body of James Hardy, a successful businessman from the Eastern Sector was found lying in an alley dumpster just off of Lawrence Drive. DNA evidence suggests that the killer was of wolverine descent. This is inconsequential, according to the head of investigation, because recent cloning experiments on the animal inhabitants of the region have allowed for at least five-thousand plausible suspects..."

I cracked my eyes open and looked up at the ceiling, my lips curled in a near-constant smile as I listened to her babble. Ironical, how their experimentation could backfire so conveniently.

I was a cleaner. My life's work amounted to that. My job was to collect off the streets the trash, inanimate or not, that made my home as filthy as it was. My work was hard, and many would think my soul damned to the very depths of hell for it. I say, even if I have a soul, I share it with my five thousand brethren, and I'm sure they've managed to make up for me in all their good works.

Still, tonight and every night, I would sleep with the entire weight of this city of sin upon my chest... and in the morning...



# Do Unto Others

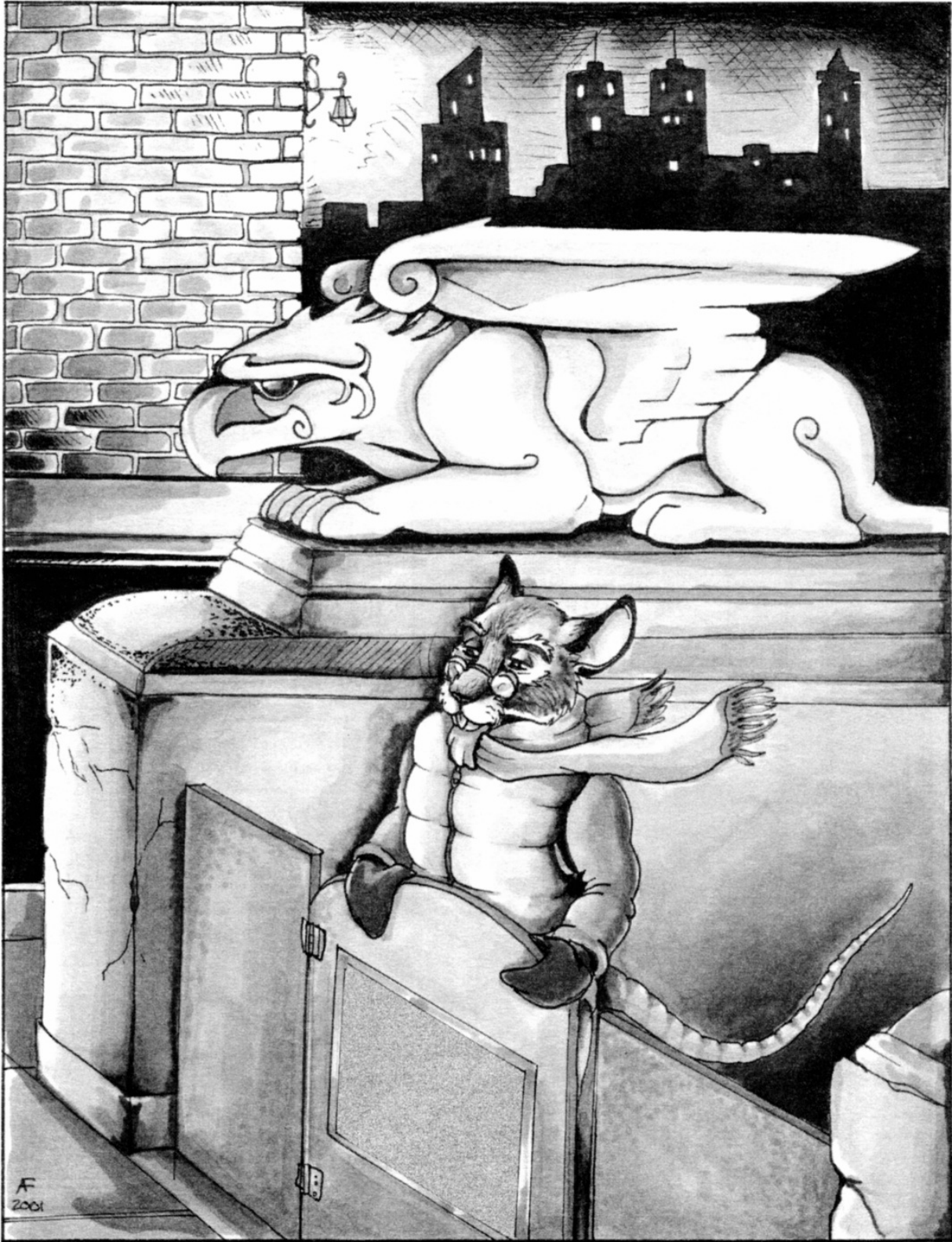
**J. Scott Rogers**

*"That which you do for the least of your brothers, you do unto me."*  
— *Matthew 25:40*

The biting wind of a late January cold front swept down the lonely city street, ruffling the whiskers of the mouse Biorg as he locked the door to the community assistance shelter. Reverend Micah Starling gritted his teeth and tightened the overcoat around him. The icy air caused his eyes to water as he looked down at his keycard. He immediately regretted leaving his earmuffs inside and considered retrieving them; the rims of his ears were already numb in the sub zero wind chill. However, the walk back to his apartment was only twelve blocks and his wife would surely have a pot of steaming cider ready when he walked in. He paused on the shelter's step to ponder.

He chuckled at the thought of how Molly would scold him for leaving her hand-knitted muffs in the Shelter. Most assuredly they'd not be there when he returned the next afternoon. One of the homeless patrons of the Shelter would certainly take a fancy to them. The bright colored wool garment that fit his murine ears could easily find other utility with one of the other Biorg species that filtered in each morning to escape the cold and have a hot meal. Whoever found them would certainly need them more than he did. Micah sighed and stepped carefully down the Shelter's steps. He'd miss those earmuffs!





Micah smiled and looked up at the building's ancient facade. The impressive granite and iron structure had stood for more than a century.



Originally constructed for wealthy city residents that desired a plush upper-Eastside address, the architects had spared no expense in adding artistic touches to its construction. Rarely was such beauty found on the gargantuan modern buildings of plasteel and permaglass that dwarfed these quiet relics. Now, the sculpted gargoyles, scrollwork and columns that adorned the building were blackened and eroded by the years of grime and neglect. The shiny ice that gripped the building during this particularly long and severe winter conveyed a lonely, haunted appearance to it. Nevertheless, this old building housed the Assistance Shelter that Reverend Starling had helped bring into existence with charitable donations, constantly dwindling funds the government earmarked for Biorg-welfare, and his personal perseverance. He loved the place and had put much of his soul into keeping it running. It was a haven for those Biorgs that had nowhere else to turn for food, shelter, and the occasional guidance and friendship that he so loved to provide.

Micah winced as the icy wind quickly reminded him to tuck his naked, scaled tail tighter under the overcoat. He looked out at the deserted street and briefly considered calling a taxi. At this time of night, the Barrio's streets could be dangerous, especially to a diminutive, aging mouse. He shook his head and sighed at his concern. Tucking his hands deep into his coat's pockets, he adjusted his glasses and started a rigorous pace down the icy sidewalk towards his apartment. The soft crunch of snow under his foot could be heard through lulls of the wind.

"Nnnnnnng... wh.. why?"

Micah stopped immediately and looked around. His ears craned to catch the mournful wail again, unsure if the wind was playing games with his hearing. His eyes focused on a row of trash dumpsters. He could clearly hear a gagging cough and muffled crying from one of them.

"Help... me.. please!"

The Biorg hesitated for a moment, then trotted to the dumpsters in alarm. "Hello? Where are you? It's me. Reverend Starling!" he called as cheerily as he could. The small Biorg struggled to lift each of the dumpster's heavy lids and stood on the ends of his toes to peer into the blackness within.

He was greeted with a screech as his eyes focused on the outline of a pathetic figure huddled in the trash.

"NO! Stay a.. away.. from me.. g. goddam RAT!"

*My Lord! It's a human!* Micah thought, quite surprised to find one so deep in the Barrio. Except for the tiny handful that lived within it, humans were uncommon here. When they did come into the neighborhood, it was usually in a group during the daylight hours. Most were smart enough to clear out before sunset. Even human gang members weren't stupid enough to venture into this neighborhood by themselves. Unless...

"It's alright! I'm not going to hurt you!" Micah assured as he pushed the dumpster's lid all the way back and put his hands together in a gesture of peace. "I'm not a rat... I can help you.." Micah paused for a moment, regarding the human's condition. He was filthy, as were his clothes, torn and rendered in slashes. He couldn't see if he was injured. "Did the rats catch you?" The man flinched at the word rats. His eyes were wild with fear, but he seemed to relax a bit when he looked back at the smiling mouse, recognizing a benefactor.

Micah's grin changed into a frown of concern. The human was apparently a transient, freezing to death, and scared out of his wits. The rat Biorg gang that "ruled" the neighborhood streets occasionally "got even" with the humankind they caught wandering the Barrio. It was a vicious cycle of violence that he had been vocal against. The human gangs would hunt the Biorgs and the rats would hunt the humans. The rats all too frequently got zealous in their mission to keep the neighborhood safe from violent outsiders, and innocents like this poor man suffered for it.

*This one got off lucky* the Biorg thought as he took off his overcoat and threw it to the man, ignoring the paralyzing bite of the wind. "Put this around your shoulders and over your head, it will help you conserve body heat until I can get you back to the shelter. I'm sorry it doesn't fit very well."

The man grappled with the coat and wordlessly did as the mouse instructed. His teeth chattered uncontrollably. His frantic, desperate eyes looked up at the Biorg quizzically "You're a..a..p... priest?" he chattered.

One of Micah's ears folded in confusion, "Ah! No, no no!" he said, shaking his head in denial. "My title 'Reverend' is purely honorary. It's an honorific given to me for my work in the Barrio. I'm the D... Director of the Assistance Shelter just down the street here." The weather was starting to get to him, his tail and ears were already numb and his jaws were shivering. He'd have to coax the man indoors quickly.

The Biorg stretched, standing on the tips of his toes and extended his hand towards the man. "Come with me. I'll get you cleaned up, put some hot food

into you, get you a warm cot and a safe, place to stay overnight. My name's Micah. What's yours?"

The human hesitated, not hearing the mouse's attempt at civility, and merely stared back. "But..th..th..*rats!* It's a Biorg shelter!"

Micah grinned and shook his head, not offended by the man's rudeness. "Don't worry about that. No Biorg would dare harm you in my House! To make you feel more comfortable, I'll set up your cot in my office so no other Biorg will disturb you."

*Molly is going to be very upset with how late I get home tonight.* Micah thought absently as he leapt up on the edge of the dumpster, balancing precariously on its lip. He'd call her once he got back to the shelter.

The man started to move, but made a hissing sound instead, falling back into the garbage. "My... legs! I can't move my legs!" he complained, looking up at the Biorg pathetically. "My legs *hurt* and I can't move them..."

"...You're OK, it's just the cold." Micah interrupted with a reassuring tone. "You need to exercise your leg muscles to get the blood flowing again. Your legs are just asleep!" It was critically important to quell the stranger's panic. It was the first step in saving the man's life. "Hold on. I'll help you to your feet." He'd seen this before. It was rarely serious. The mouse leapt off the lip of the dumpster and landed in the trash next to the man.

The human outweighed him by a hundred pounds and was a good foot taller. *If he can't walk, I won't be able to carry him!* Micah thought. The best he'd be able to do would be to help him rise and steady his walk back to the Shelter, where the both of them could defrost over a hot cup of tea and get to know one another. The cold paralysis in the man's legs should be easy to massage out, but if that wasn't the case, he'd have to...

Without warning, something smashed against Micah's muzzle, sending the hapless Biorg crashing, into the side of the dumpster. The mouse collapsed into the rubbish, gripping his face in agony. A feeling of warmth leaked through his woolen mittens to his cold fingers. He heard the lid of the dumpster slam shut through the ringing in his ears. He could feel fingers prodding his clothing, but the Biorg was too stunned to resist.

A hand gripped Micah's ear and painfully lifted his head out of the rubbish. A piercing bright light blinded the mouse.

"Alright mouse, gimme yer' wallet! Hurry up now... or... or I'll cut you wide open!" The man's voice was a frightened, desperate snarl, accompanied by the cold edge of a straight-razor against the side of his bloodied snout.

Micah blinked several times to clear the dancing motes of light from his vision and steady his thoughts. As a life long resident of the inner city, Micah had been mugged before and knew how to handle himself. Give the attacker whatever he wanted and don't resist, it would come and go as quickly as possible. However, the experience was never pleasant, and that strategy didn't work for everybody. The hand holding the razor at Micah's muzzle trembled. The fellow was probably a junkie and sounded as frightened as Micah felt. That made him extremely dangerous. The mouse consciously made an effort to keep the tremble out of his voice.

"I don'th have one... I've goth fourtheen dollarth in my coath pocketh and the wathch on my wristh." the Biorg sputtered through his broken muzzle. Micah watched the man's face carefully, trying not to wince from the pain of being pinched by his ear. He was afraid baring his incisors, a grimace of pain, might be mistaken as an attempt to bite the human. That mistake had cost too many Biorgs their life...

The human dropped Micah's ear and carelessly ripped the watch off his wrist, stuffing it into his shirt. He then ferreted the small bit of cash from Micah's pocket and stared at it with displeasure. He crumpled it and stuffed the wad into his shirt, then seized Micah's entire ear in his fist.

"You're lying to me!" the human screamed into Micah's face while shaking him by his ear. "I know ya' got more money somewhere! Give it up right *now!!!* I swear ta' God I'll KILL you!!!" The razor's edge cut slightly into the side of Micah's snout, and a few of his whiskers fell from his face.

Micah whimpered and closed his eyes, biting his teeth together to keep himself from crying out. "I.. I'm not lying to you! I have nothing more.. please..."

The human was getting more agitated, his voice quavered with violent hysteria. "Maybe we should go back to yer' shelter? I bet ya' got a safe there or something. Something that might keep me from *skinning* your scrawny pelt?

"*Oh no... no, not this.. please!*" Micah pleaded silently. He absolutely could not allow this man into the shelter. Not only would he endanger the

volunteer night staff, but he could rob some of the Biorgs that were bedded down there for the night... *Or hurt them!*

He couldn't allow that to happen.

Micah spat out some blood and spoke evenly, but softly. "I cannot allow that. I won't let you in and you can't get past the palm-scanner security lock unless I'm alive." The mouse tried desperately not to tremble as he lied. The building was secured only with a keycard system, but the human might be dissuaded from trying break in if he believed it would be difficult. It was a very simple lie, a decision to protect something he loved very much, though one that would likely cost him his life.

This thief was not going to get into his assistance shelter. Micah stared back at the human with a determined expression. "I'm sorry..." he added softly. "You've taken everything I will allow you to take from me..",

The man stared with disbelief at the rodent before grabbing his broken muzzle and slamming his head against the wall of the dumpster several times. "W..Well, that's just too... bad... for... YOU!!!" the man sputtered, raging with anger. The Biorg screamed with each thrust, gripping the human's hands ineffectually with his own.

The human grasped Micah's neck and held the razor close to his face before slashing him across the stomach, shredding his shirt with the first stroke, slashing the fur and skin beneath it with the next. The Biorg was too weak to resist. The pain became a distant sensation with each proceeding cut, just beyond the limits of his consciousness.

The mouse's eyes watered as blackness overtook him. *Molly will be very upset I got myself killed over the shelter... very upset, indeed.*



Micah awoke with a start. His mouth was filled with a stale, metallic taste, which contrasted with the scent of freshly baked bread and the aromatic tang of Earl Grey tea that greeted his sensitive nose. The Biorg slowly opened his eyes, but he could only detect blurry, flickering shadows in the subdued light. He was warm and comfortable, without the slightest hint of pain. He succumbed to his lingering drowsiness and slowly re-closed his eyes. He had made it home. *Was everything that happened last night a dream?*

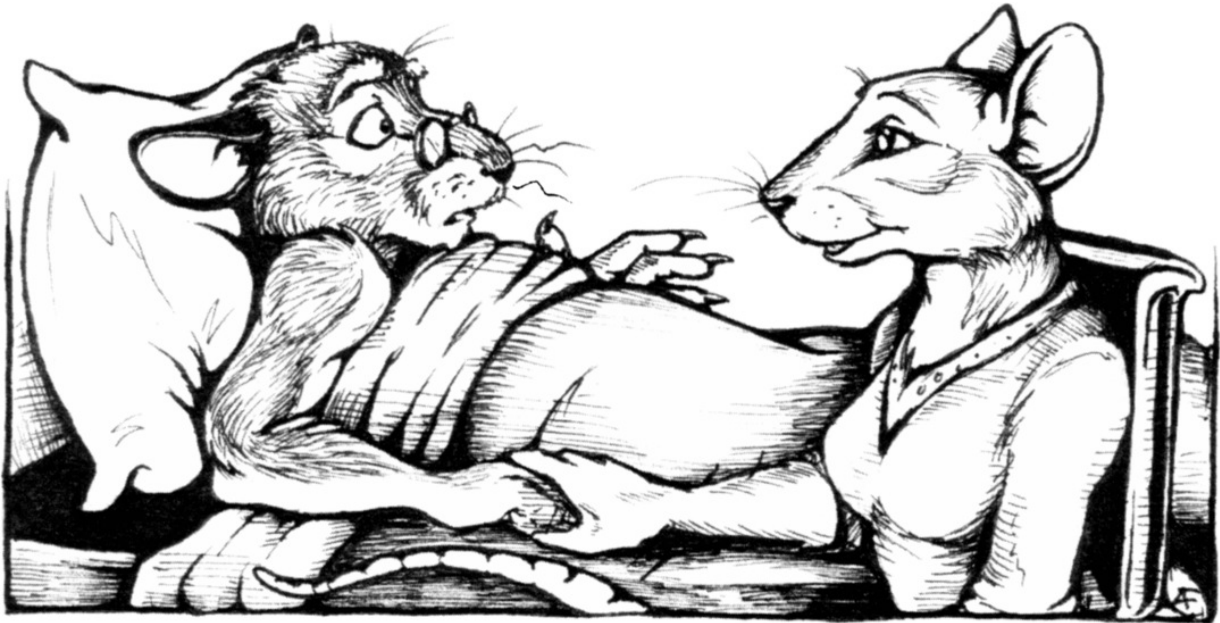
"M... Molly? he murmured.

Micah felt her sit on the edge of his bed. Her hand caressed the side of his face. He grinned sleepily and reached up to greet it, noticing the hand was quite larger than Molly's should be.

A feminine, light hearted chuckle caused Micah's eyes to shoot open and focus on the face close to his. "Oh! No, Reverend! I'm not Molly!" the cheery face said.

It was that of a beautiful female rat Biorg. Her fur was sleek and soft, with a pleasing warm champagne color. Her throat wore a fine, whitish fur that descended down her neck to disappear under the collar of her shirt. Her body was contoured and shapely, modest breasts complementing her frame. Her tail was long and smoothly scaled, without a hint of blemish or scar. She perked her tan ears and smiled back at the shocked mouse with soft candlelight reflecting in her attractive, dark brown eyes.

"I..where..who are...?!" Micah sputtered with alarm.



She pressed her hand lightly against his chest. "You're safe. Reverend. Don't be afraid! Relax! Nothing is going to happen to you here. You're going to be alright!" The rat leaned in close with a cheery grin, ignoring the mouse's confused expression.

"Would you like some tea?" she inquired cheerily before he could speak.

Micah stared. His mind swirled with confusion. Hadn't he been attacked tonight? He could remember the cold, the blood seeping from his broken

muzzle, the stinging agony of the razor's edge against his stomach. Yet, here he was comfortably in bed with a stranger staring down at him. Hopelessly disoriented, he laid his head back on the pillow with a groan.

"I'm sorry... I'm... just a bit confused, you see." Micah sputtered in explanation with an apologetic tone. He lifted a hand to his head and rubbed his fur. "I didn't expect to wake up again, much less wake up to such a beautiful lady." The mouse snapped his jaws shut, suddenly embarrassed by his careless words.

The rat suddenly burst into warm laughter and leaned closer to him, reaching to take his hands in hers. "Oh, Reverend, that's very kind of you!" she said softly and gently squeezed his fingers. "Rats rarely ever get called beautiful. It's so nice to hear it once in awhile." She leaned forward and kissed his forehead.

Micah's embarrassment eased as he regarded her face. It was a lot like Molly's, sincere, forthright and alive with joy. It was a face that the mouse saw very infrequently on others in the Barrio, especially during Winter. Hers was a beautiful face, not just for its physical qualities, but for the warm glow of maternal care that shone from her eyes.

*Those eyes...*

The mouse relaxed, feeling the warmth of her hands against his. The warm, pleasant lilac scent of her perfume mingled with the aromas of bread and tea. He kept staring into her eyes and finally smiled himself. They invited him to trust and believe in her. He welcomed it, seeing a kindred soul reaching out to him. Unsolicited kindness was a gift rarely offered, and something to be graciously accepted when it was. This rat had saved his life tonight, possibly at a serious risk to her safety, and he could find no reason to distrust her.

Micah swallowed and returned a squeeze to the rat's strong hands "Yes... I'd love some tea. But what's your..."

"Good!" She interrupted, her face animated with the unique joy gained by doing favors for others. There was a distinctive trill in her voice that further livened Micah's mood. "It's my special blend. Discovered it when I didn't have enough of one tea to make a pot! Started mixing what I had left — Darjeeling, chickory, some anise seed, oil of bergamot, much like Earl Grey — I think you'll like it very much!"

She chuckled as she rose, walked to the bedroom door and turned to grin back at her guest. "I will be happy to answer all your questions when I come back with the refreshments." The rat leaned against the doorjamb and crossed her arms across her breast. "Though, I'm surprised you don't remember me!"

Micah blinked to clear his vision and peered at her carefully, his whiskers quivering in thought. *Where have I met her before?* He searched his memory for glimpses of her face, but couldn't find hers amongst all the others. The Biorg eventually shook his head, feeling a pang of guilt as he confessed his ignorance. "I'm sorry, I just don't remember you." His voice softened, seeing the disappointment behind her wan smile. "Please forgive me."

The rat's smile faltered, a brief shadow of disappointment passing over her eyes. "Well... it was twenty years ago. It's understandable. Reverend, don't feel bad over it." she said flatly with a disconsolate voice. The rat dropped her arms and rubbed her palms together. She looked up with a forced smile and shrugged away her wistfulness. "You've helped a lot of Biorgs since then, I'm certain those faces get blurry over time." She relented and gave him a wink before swiftly exiting, her tail swirling gracefully after her.

Micah watched her, speechless, as her tail snaked quickly out of view. He felt sorry at her obvious disappointment, but couldn't help but feel attracted to her as well. Though she was thin, the rat was quite comely. But, her eyes... *Those eyes!* They gripped his heart. Wonderfully deep, rich brown eyes filled with warmth, compassion and love that compelled him to reach out and embrace her. The urge was almost overwhelming.

"Come, come Micah! Molly would have your ears!" he chuckled quietly to himself, knowing it an absurd fantasy to feel this way. He just didn't remember ever meeting this particular rat before. There had been so many rats in his past, the Barrio was heavily populated with them. He exhaled brusquely in resignation.

Micah cupped his hands together while shaking his head. "You'll just have to be patient, old mouse, and give up! Best to let her explain. After the night you've had, you're lucky to be... alive?"

The Biorg fell immediately silent and pulled the covers back to stare at his bare chest.

He gasped in disbelief.



The wounds on his chest were barely noticeable. The fur had been neatly shaved away and the wounds professionally cleaned and bandaged. The lacerations and punctures he thought would end his life were nothing more than superficial injuries.

He gingerly brought his fingers to his muzzle, feeling it gently. Other than a slight bruise above his nose and a pair of aching incisors, it wasn't broken and it didn't hurt. He opened and shut his mouth several times to convince himself. The absence of pain was encouraging, but infinitely more confusing! Micah could distinctly remember the excruciating pain as his muzzle was shattered with a brick. The repeated stabs of the razor across his chest, stomach, arms and hands...

The mouse continued to examine himself with a grateful disbelief. Nowhere was he seriously injured. He chuckled his good fortune. "Micah Starling, you are one *blessed* Biorg..."

"That's most certainly true!" His host said suddenly from the doorway, again demonstrating a talent with abrupt entrances. The rat held a tray with a teapot, two cups, a loaf of home made bread and assorted jellies.

"I heard you screaming for help and chased off that wretched mugger! You lost consciousness the moment I reached in to pull you out of the dump-ster. Pity I didn't get there sooner, I might've been able to prevent the whole thing!" Her smile beamed at him from across the room. Her smile was happily infectious and Micah couldn't help but return it.

The rat walked over to the bed and placed the tray in his lap. She silently poured two cups of the steaming brew and stirred in a little honey and cream, offered him one then took a seat next to his bed. The rat crossed her legs and folded her tail over her lap and looked back at Micah with a pleased expression. She held up a silver bracelet in her fingers. "I wasn't able to put your watch back together though." She admitted guiltily.

Micah blinked at her, then broke into a relieved chuckle. "Oh nuts to the watch, young lady! Thank you. Thank you with all my heart! You saved my life last night!" His words hardly reflected how much gratitude he felt. But Micah's expression changed back to confusion. He didn't understand how he came to be in this rat's house. In *reality* he should've been a frozen corpse, forgotten in some alley trash dumpster.

The mouse folded his hands against his stomach and smiled pleasantly at the rat, his whiskers quivering gently. "Now, if you'd please, my dear, tell

me what happened?" He pressed his fingers against his chest. "I thought I was seriously hurt..."

"Lyssie!" She interrupted gleefully, ignoring his leading question. The rat leaned forward with an expectant expression.

Micah's thoughts concentrated on her name, thinking a moment as his face turned into a concerned frown. Slowly, the mouse's eyes widened as a reluctant memory surfaced. He gaped up at her.

"My God... is it really *you*?" the mouse sputtered. The rat's cheery face matched the one kindled in his mind-except in his memory, it was much younger, just a teenager. However, it was also bleeding, bruised, filthy and terrified beyond words. His mind began to sort through the images and places resurrected by her name.

The rat's warm brown eyes went glassy with tears as she nodded confirmation.

Micah's voice choked. "Lyssie! Oh my... I'm so sorry! I should have remembered you!" the mouse gasped.

Lyssie immediately reached over and clutched his hands in hers. "No Reverend! No! Please don't be sorry!" She squeezed his fingers for emphasis. "It would be wrong for you to remember me with regret!" She moved quickly to the edge of his bed and embraced the smaller Biorg, pressing her muzzle firmly against his neck. She rocked him in his arms like a mother cradling an infant. "Micah, my dear old friend!" She kissed him gently on his forehead and brushed her hand along the fur of his cheek. "It is so wonderful to see you again!"

Micah returned Lyssie's embrace, his eyes shut tight against the old memories as they flooded his mind. They were unwelcome spectres he had long ago locked away from his conscience. The ghosts had taunted his self-confidence and fed his insecurities about his work in helping others. After all, what difference was he *really* making in the world? The poisonous doubt had all started one day so long ago and he had never truly recovered from it. He had felt so impotent helping Lyssie, it had plagued him ever since. He had turned to the bottle to silence the ghost's voices, but it created new demons with even sharper fangs and a more venomous bite.

Lyssie looked down at his face, reading his thoughts and understanding them. "Micah, you realized long after my body healed, there were other wounds I had suffered that day. Hidden wounds! Wounds that would've

painfully rotted my soul, withering away the good that was still within me, taking its time to corrupt me from the inside out." You knew the doctors wouldn't know how to heal these, much less care to try.. But, you saw that they did because you *cared!*"

Micah had been coming home from a softball game. He could hear the rat's screams through the tenement's thin walls as he climbed the stairs to the apartment he shared with Molly. He had burst into the apartment to find Lyssie with her wrists cruelly tied to a rusted heater radiator. Her gag was poorly tied over her muzzle and she had managed to finally chew it off and strangle out a scream. The three humans leering over her had raped and severely beaten their captive. Her mother was already dead on the floor, her skull crushed with a crowbar.

The old feelings of rage emboldened by helplessness surged anew in Micah's heart. One small mouse Biorg wouldn't stand a chance against the three larger humans, he considered fleeing, to seek help, until he noticed what *else* they were doing to his neighbor's daughter.

One of the men had a fillet knife. He had started on the back of young rat's neck and worked his way down to the middle of her back. The rat's bloodied pelt was rolled back over her shoulder blades like a remnant of carpet.

The rest of the mouse's memory was more or less whispered blur. He awoke to a police officer wresting his bloody softball bat from his clenched fists...

Micah's arms clutched about the rat's neck, hugging her fiercely "Oh God! ... Lyssie! I wanted to do so much more for you. But we weren't allowed to adopt you, we... we were deemed unfit parents. They hauled you to that horrid orphanage and eventually they didn't even allow us to even see you anymore!" Micah tucked his muzzle into the crook of her neck, hiding his face in shame, sighing back the regret that tightened his throat. He forced in a calming breath and spoke his words more clearly, though hissing over his clenched teeth. "I could've fought to keep you. But... I didn't. I felt like there was nothing more I could do for you. I... just... let them take you away!"

Lyssie released her embrace and held the sides of his head. The rat looked into Micah's eyes. "Tut! What's with all this regret! Stop it right now! What about all those visits to my orphanage? What about all those gifts you sent me. You underestimate just *how* important you were to me back then!" She chirped scoldingly. "During the year I spent in the hospital, *you* gave me the

strength I needed to deal with the nightmares. *You* gave me the will to cope with them and learn how to live again! Without that, I wouldn't have made it. *You* were the light that saw me safely back to this world!"

Her voice softened, becoming delicate and as soothing as a warm blanket. She cradled his head once again, gently stroking his whiskers with her fingers. "Can't you see what a great moment this is?" she asked, her eyes alight with elation. "How often does anybody have the chance to say 'thank you' to a loved one before they're gone? To acknowledge the love one has shown to you, to return it, and let them know how important they were to you? I've been given such a wonderful gift. No, Micah, please do not remember with sadness. Remember with joy."

"You loved me as a father, Micah, and I will always love you for it. You made a difference in my life. You make a difference in other's lives too. Always remember this, my friend. Your efforts are not wasted." Lyssie said somberly as she grasped his hands and stared sincerely back into his eyes. "Thank you, Micah. Thank you forever." she smiled, then glanced at the bedroom window and sighed. "It's late." she said distantly, with a touch of sadness. "You should get some sleep, you need to heal."

"Sleep?" Micah chuckled humorously, his mood elevated by the sincerity of Lyssie's words. To find evidence that his efforts were not wasted on this young rat gratified his soul. Her happiness was contagious. "Oh my dear! How could I possibly sleep? I'm so... *happy* to have found you again! We've got to catch up on all the lost time! Wait until Molly..."

"No..no Micah..." She chuckled and pushed the mouse back down on the pillow while slowly shaking her head. "It'll be dawn in two hours and I don't want to listen to your wife's scolding that I kept you up all night!" She gently stroked the scruff of fur on his forehead and trailed her fingertips over his ears, caressing them until Micah relaxed and his eyelids started to droop.

"Sleep now, my friend. There will be time for all things, much later..."



"Wake up, dear!"

"Mmmm... so pretty!" Micah murmured dreamily.

"For Heaven's sake, Micah! You must be tired!" A muzzle pushed its way against Micah's and kissed him warmly. "You must've come in very late last night! I stayed up as late as my eyes would let me. You just crawled right to bed with hardly a peck on my nose when you finally came in! But I'll forgive you your good eye for beauty!" A hearty, playful giggle followed.

Micah focused his eyes on the Biorg next to him. It was his wife, Molly. She was wearing her bathrobe and had just showered, her fiery umber fur was matted and spiky from the dampness. She was vigorously toweling off her head and was watching him with her bright golden eyes between scrubs.

Micah sat upright like a spring, his eyes wide in confusion. "You're not Lyssie!" He bellowed a bit more forcefully than he would've liked.

Molly stopped toweling herself and hung the towel around her neck, looking back at her husband with a grimace. "No sir, I am *not* Lyssie!" She mimicked with a sarcastic tone. "Micah! Have your eyes been wandering to that girlygirl vixen that has been dancing at Piccadilly's Tavern! Don't go teasing me or I'll whip this towel on your butt so hard you'll know why they call them 'rat-tails'!"

Micah was too confused to hear the tease in his wife's voice. He fumbled for his glasses and hastily put them on. They rested at a funny angle on his snout. Micah felt his heart pounding in his chest, his head swimming from disorientation.

"No... No! Molly! Lyssie is a rat... you know! Lyssie! *Our* Lyssie! I was saved by her last night! I mean, I was *dying* and she.. uh!.." Micah threw the covers off and fumbled out of bed. He hurriedly paced across the room twice before he noticed he had no clothes. "Damnation! Where are my clothes! How did I get here?" he sputtered frantically, throwing his arms up into the air in surrender.

Molly had been rolling her towel to snap him as he spoke, but the playfulness drained from her mood. Micah wasn't teasing her. He was very confused and his whiskers beat at a blinding speed. She put the towel down and slowly walked over to him, clutched his upper arm and lead him back to their bed.

"Micah... calm down! You're acting like a child! Take a deep breath, lay back and tell me what's going on." She said as soothingly as she could, trying to keep the fear out of her voice. Her husband was normally the more

level-headed of the pair, and he only acted irrationally when he had been drinking.

Molly bit her lower lip as a ball of panic seared in her gut, she couldn't go through that again. He had promised her to put the bottle down for good. He had kept his promise so far, but, it had been a long, difficult winter. She gently put her hand on his chest. "Love, please.. what's the matter?"

Micah looked up at his wife's forced smile and took a breath. His hand joined her's against his chest. "I was attacked last night while coming home from the shelter. I tried to help a man, a derelict that got lost up here in the Barrio, but he turned on me and tried to kill me. He slashed me with a razor and smashed a brick into my face!"

Molly gasped. "Micah I..."

"Shhh! Shhh! Shush!" Micah hissed, too excited for sympathy. "I was rescued by a rat.. I was rescued by *Lyssie*! She heard my cries, picked me up and brought me home. She bandaged my wounds and... and.." He swiftly licked his lips. "*Somehow* I got here!" Micah exclaimed, throwing his hands into the air in exasperation. "I don't know how I got back home!"

"It's more curious that you aren't injured." Molly sniped, stroking her fingers through the fur on Micah's exposed belly. There was no evidence of the any wounds on the mouse's body whatsoever. She looked at him sternly, her worry being overtaken with a growing panic, which surfaced as a heating anger. "Micah! Be honest with me! Have you started drinking again...?"

Micah looked back at her aghast. "NO! I haven't! Molly! Please! *Listen* to me! I'm not making this up! It was Lyssie! *Our* Lyssie! She lives in the Barrio!" He suddenly poured from the bed and kneeled down in front of her, grasped both her hands and looked up at her, appealing for her trust. "Molly. I... I cannot explain everything, but I did not dream this!"

"Micah." Molly started to say evenly, trying to keep anger from her voice. What he was claiming was nonsense. He *must* have started on the bottle again. She felt like slapping him for his lies! "We haven't heard from Lyssie in almost twenty years. We weren't able to find out who adopted her nor find out where she was. If she lived in the city, don't you think that she would've contacted us after all that time?"

She knew that her inquisitive husband would need the facts laid out for him before he could let go of this ridiculous story. Only then would she be

able to help him figure out what *really* happened; that he had really had a drink, then another, and perhaps more last night. He had come in much later than he should. Suddenly Molly's anger gave way to sadness. She felt like crying, but, she loved him entirely too much to let him keep this false delusion.

"Why should she?" Micah countered earnestly. "We would've found her if we looked hard enough. But we *didn't*! She could've been living three streets away from us for the last decade, but the way we live, in our own secular way, we would never have known it!" He was letting more spite enter his voice than he intended. He was getting frustrated that Molly didn't believe him, and was so quick to write off his story to alcohol. The mouse swallowed, he really couldn't blame her. After all, his story was incredible, and his past was one that would instill confidence in her. Micah could admit that he couldn't order the details himself, how could she believe him?

"I'm sorry. Love. I didn't mean to snap." Micah softened, dropping his hands to her's. "But I was hurt last night and she saved my life. I'm not lying to you. I did not break my promise to you. I am not drinking again. Please, believe me! Trust me! I don't understand this at all, but, I'm willing to find out what happened." He looked her in the eye, pleading with her. "Help me find her. Lyssie is out there. We must find her!"

Molly sighed and smiled. Despite the silly, rambling impossibilities of his story, she was willing to play his game. He deserved that from her, at least. She'd see him to the end of this. It would be the only way to convince her stubborn husband that he was imagining things. "Micah." She said gently. "If she's in the Tristate Sprawl, she shouldn't be too hard to track down from the city's database." She smiled wanly at him and clutched his hand. "Shall we go find her then?"

Micah grinned wildly. "Yes! Of course! Let's go, dear! We can get this all cleared up and I can convince you that I'm not a raving psycho-mouse." He swiftly got up and pulled her after him towards the door.

"Uh... Mr. Starling!" Molly quipped, putting on her brakes before he opened their front door. "I think Lyssie would appreciate our visit much more if we were wearing clothes..."

Micah blinked, glancing down at himself, grinning with embarrassment. "Yes, of course she would." he muttered.



Micah was grim faced as he and Molly got off the train. He hadn't said a word after the City's database listed Lyssie's address in Brighton Beach. It was across the river and on the other side of Brooklyn, making his story that Lyssie had rescued him seem even more ludicrous. He couldn't even figure out why she'd be in the Barrio in the first place. His mind wandered through the possibilities. *Was she visiting someone here? did she happen by after this visit?*

*Maybe I did dream this whole thing up...*

The reality of the situation was starting to surround him like a cold, wet shroud. It was becoming a more ponderous burden, the doubts of his recollection getting heavier to carry with each subway stop. Molly's stern side glances at him were stinging him harder, quietly reminding him of her waning belief in him.

The mouse ground his incisors in silent frustration. The winter storm continued to howl around them, except its bite was even worse this close to the harbor.

"Are you sure you don't want to call her first?" Molly said dully, tucking her scarf tighter around her neck.

"No." Micah said sullenly, his will to disagree or argue with her dissolving quickly. "This is the only rat Biorg named 'Lyssie' in all of New York. She *has* to be the one." Micah said with a sudden emphasis. The desire to complete this quest compelled him to carry on. He had to see her. He needed physical proof that he was not hallucinating. He needed to prove it to his wife. "Come on, let's go, it's across the street." Micah stepped off the train platform and started trudging through the ankle deep snow.

The streets were deserted. The storm had driven the residents indoors. Only the Biorg couple tread on the dangerously slippery sidewalks towards the large, ancient apartment building. They entered the building's foyer and dusted the snow off their coats. The building had been retrofitted with a tenant database terminal. Without a word, Micah typed in Lyssie's name.

He stared at the terminal's response with disbelief.

"She's not here!" Micah nearly screamed. He rechecked the database hard copy he got at the Manhattan library. It clearly said this was the right place. He turned to Molly, his eyes wide with frustration-poisoned anger. "I don't



understand, the city database is derived from these residential ones! Why can she not be in this one!" He violently crumpled the print out, leaned his arm against the tiled wall and rested his forehead on it. He sighed, then suddenly slammed his fist against the computer terminal "Dammit!"

"Calm down Micah!" Molly hissed, her voice was rising from frustration. "Sometimes computers aren't always updated with one another. You know that!" She laid her hand against his neck and glanced quickly at movement past the glass of the lobby door. She spied another Biorg inside, an extremely tall, greyhound Canid who was polishing the brass fixtures around an ornate fireplace mantle in the lobby.

Molly rapped on the door before Micah could speak and waved at the greyhound when he looked their way.

"Molly..." Micah said quietly. "What are you doing?"

The greyhound put down the can of polish, wiped his hands on his coveralls and walked towards the door. Molly grinned at the greyhound as he approached, and answered her husband quickly. "Helping you." Helping us... *God forgive you if you're drinking again, Micah.* Molly thought darkly.

The greyhound was twisting the polishing cloth around his knuckles as he opened the lobby door slightly. "Yeh? What's tha' mattah'?" he said with a thick Brooklyn accent and looking down at Micah with a strangely predatorial grin. He was chewing a wooden toothpick and smelled of cleaning solvent.



"Uh..ah.." Micah sputtered, unnerved at the skinny canine's eerie, carnivorous smile. "We're looking for a resident that's supposed to be here... but I'm not sure we have the right..."

"Her name is Ms. Lyssie Calais, a rat Biorg that lives in apartment 24D" Molly interrupted, staring up at the towering canine without flinching. Though Molly was barely five foot high, she was barely intimidated by the canine's aggressive grin. The greyhound's expression softened, a pall of confusion on his face.

"Uh... Ms. Calais?"

"Does she live here still or not?" Molly demanded, suddenly curt with temper, her hands pressing on the front door. It was clear this particular canine Biorg wasn't the brightest of his pack. She normally had the patience to handle those like him, but she was tired, cold and all too eager to get this nonsense over and done with!

The greyhound swallowed hard, taken aback by Molly's impudence "Uh... no. Not really anymore." the dog muttered uncomfortably, his eyes glancing away from the mouse's glare. He paused a moment, gripping the polishing rag in both hands.

"She wuz' killed a couple nights ago..."

Micah's breath caught in his throat and nearly bit his tongue. He felt a icy claw grab his chest and descended quickly into his stomach, bringing up a wave of nausea. His knees weakened. The Biorg stumbled against the door with a small gasp.

"Micah! Come on. Sit down.." Molly grabbed her husband and lead him to one of the lobby's threadbare chairs, pushing past the worried looking canine.

The greyhound followed them into the lobby and rested his hands on the back of the other chair, watching the mouse couple quietly for a few moments "Aw... hey, I'm sorry, but that's old news 'round here. Somebody snuck inta' tha' buildin', went inta' her apartment ta' rob it. She wuz' there, tha' bastard slit her throat. He then jus' walked outta' here. Tha' cops were checkin' out her place fer' evidence an' all that, but they left. Boss tole' me I could start cleanin' the place up. It's pretty nasty up there... gonna take me all weekend" He looked down at Micah, who was clutching his muzzle with his eyes shut tight as the greyhound complained.

"Uh... hey, sorry... ya' gonna' be okay?"

"That's a lie!" Micah spat acidly, frustration overwhelming his manners. The pieces of this puzzle were refusing to come into place, at least, the way he wished them to. He dropped his hands and glared angrily at the canine. "I was just here last night! I was talking to her! I was *here* and she brought me home!" He slowly rose to his feet and stepped towards the towering greyhound. "She was so... alive, so *beautiful*! Don't stand there and play a fool's game on me!"

"Micah... please..." Molly said soothingly while putting her hand on his neck. Anger was almost alien to her husband, she suddenly felt like crying.

He shrugged it off. "No!" He spun around on his wife. "Don't!" he hissed and shook his finger at her. He quickly turned back to the greyhound "I want to see her apartment."

The greyhound took a step back and sputtered. "I... I can't open them doors! I'm not supposed ta' let anyone in there."

Micah interrupted bitterly. "Listen to me, and listen well!" He glared with a hot anger mulled with frustration, clenching his fist tightly against his chest. "I *was* here last night and what you're telling us makes no sense whatsoever!"

The greyhound stared, dumbfounded. "I'm tellin' ya', it ain't..."

Micah suddenly spun on his heels and stomped towards the elevator, pushing its button angrily, and shoving his hands inside his coat's pockets. He seethed until he sensed the canine and his wife standing silently behind him. His anger dissipated as the weariness and confusion caught up with him.

"I'm sorry." he said meekly, with his back towards them. He bit his lip to keep the quaver out of his voice. "I need to know if I... was imagining all of this."

*There, you said it.*

"The only way I'm going to find my answer is if I can have a quick look inside Lyssie's apartment. Just a quick one." He turned as the elevator doors opened and looked up pleadingly at the greyhound.

"You're the only one that can help me. If you say no, we'll leave quietly."

The greyhound looked down at the tired looking mouse and took a breath, thinking about the consequences for breaking the rules. He clenched his jaws, making his decision. *This little guy sure needs a break...*

"Sure, fella'.. comon', jus' a quick one." The greyhound held the elevator door open to let the mouse and his wife enter.

The elevator opened on the 24th floor of the building and the trio stepped out. The greyhound led them down the harsh, fluorescent-lighted hallway and stopped before an apartment door that still had remnants of bright. Mylar police line tape around its edge. The keycard lock was sealed with heavy plastic ordinance card promising dire consequences if the door was breached.

The greyhound carefully peeled back the card and inserted his passkey into the lock. "Don't mattah' much..." he muttered bitterly as the door

clacked open. "Tha' cops ain't gonna bother figgurin' this one out, she was a Brooklyn rat, ain't much in'trest in figgurin' this one out anyways." He pushed open the door and flicked on the lights as the two mice looked around him into the room. He stepped aside. "Ya' still want to go in? Yer' not gonna like what ya' see in there..."

Molly took the canine's hand and squeezed it as Micah pushed impatiently past them into the apartment. "Thank you. We won't make any trouble and will be out of your way as quick as we can." she said with a grin. She tentatively stepped after her husband, who had stopped in the middle of the living room with a distant, vague expression.

His eyes darted about the room, they wandered over the furnishings without recognition. His memory failed him. With a rising bile in his stomach, he realized nothing in the room looked familiar. Micah frowned and sucked on his lower lip, but remained silent as Molly stepped behind him.

"Well?" she asked carefully, noticing his tense posture. She didn't like having to do this to Micah, but it was for his own good. Getting into this apartment and letting him see for himself that his ordeal was an hallucination was the first step to getting him help. Once he understood his delusion was caused by him falling back to the bottle, she could convince him to return to therapy and get back to their lives. The reasons for the fall in the first place were another matter.

Micah abruptly turned and trudged silently down the hallway to the bedroom, his frustration surrounding him like a cloud of thick smoke. Molly watched him go and hugged her arms, releasing an uncomfortable sigh. The greyhound leaned against the door jamb with his arms folded and stared at her patiently, chewing his toothpick. "I'm sorry 'bout yer' friend, lady." he stated with a subdued voice.

"I know." Molly said quickly and firmly before the canine could talk anymore. She didn't want to accidentally vent her own frustrations on the greyhound, and bantering about the obvious wasn't going to help her stay her temper. "I'll go get him and we'll leave. Thank you, again." She quietly padded down the hallway and peered into the open door of the bedroom.

Micah was sitting on the small, unmade twin bed in the cozy, cluttered bedroom. His hands were resting on his thighs as he stared blankly at the dark mauve pool of dried blood that stained the worn, beige carpet. His tail

and ears both drooped wearily as he stared emotionlessly at the murder scene. He looked as if he had aged twenty years.

Molly paused and then moved to slowly sit beside Micah on the bed. She stared at the large stain on the carpet and took his hand, pressing it into her bosom "I'm sorry, my love." she said quietly, her eyes frozen on the spot that their little Lyssie had left the world. She swallowed a hard lump in her throat, her eyes filling with tears. "That's horrible, just horrible! Our Lyssie...." Molly squeezed Micah's hand with both of her's, hugging it under her chin. She sniffed back her tears, not knowing what more she could say. She wanted to help ease her husband's pain, but they would have time to mourn their lost daughter later.

Molly glanced back at the murder scene, looked up at her husband. "Hon, please, let's go home."

Micah merely stared at the blood stain and eventually bowed his head, closing his eyes as tears dripped down the fur of his muzzle. He simply nodded then looked at his wife, the strain and grief surfacing in his face. "I'm so sorry for doing this to you. I.. don't know what happened. I might have imagined everything, somehow." He sighed, still confused at what he believed. "I can't explain anything, Molly. I only promise you I've not gone back to drinking. Please believe me..." His words sounded weak and ineffectual.

Molly smiled. Whatever had happened to Micah she didn't understand, but she did believe *something* had happened to him. An hallucination, or a vision, she'd never know, but she understood whatever it was, he needed to believe in it.

That would have to do for the both of them now.

"I believe you, Micah." Molly said softly, her whiskers slowly quivering as she gently pulled him into her arms, her eyes wandered back to the carpet.

"Let's go home..."



The two Biorgs huddled as close together as they exited the apartment lobby. The sky had gotten dark, though the blizzard still raged. The subway

platform was just across the street, but the storm made it feel a much further journey.

Molly tightened her scarf around her neck and glanced at her husband, who was gingerly touching the bright pink flesh of his ears and wincing. She frowned and reached up to cup his frozen ears between her mittens. They weren't frostbitten yet. "For Heaven's sakes, Micah! Why didn't you bring your muffs? You're going to get frostbite!"

Micah wiped an errant bit of snow from his glasses and smiled at her guiltily, grateful for her warm mittens shielding the wind from his frozen ears. He had forgotten his muffs at the shelter, and now he'd have to admit to his wife that he lost them. It was a bit sooner than he wanted to have this argument. "I'm sorry, Molly." he said carefully. "I left them at the shelter last night. Forgot to get them before I left." He exhaled deeply into his own mittens, his breath's vapor whisked immediately away by the wind, and pressed them against his nose. His words sounded weak and ineffectual. "I'm old and my memory is going..."

"You didn't leave them at the shelter, you left them at home." Molly interrupted. "You must've gone to bed with them on because I found them in bed with us. I put them back in the top drawer where you keep them." Molly slipped her arm through his and started to walk them towards the subway platform. "*Honestly*, Micah..."

Micah stopped dead in his tracks and turned to look at Molly with wide eyes, jerking her to a halt.

"They're at *home*? I wore them to *bed*?"

Molly raised her eyebrows at her husband. "Yes! Silly! I wish you'd treat those muffs a little better. I'm *not* going to quilt you another pair if you're going to start sleeping in them!" She pressed her palm against his forehead, tutting with disapproval. "It's been a long day, Micah. Let's get you home and some hot tea into you."

Suddenly, the blizzard's cold seemed merely a distant annoyance. Micah slowly smiled at his wife as a sensation of warmth flourished inside. A pleasant feeling that reminded him of the scent of lilacs, fresh baked bread and Earl Grey tea.





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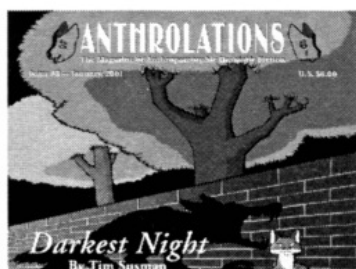
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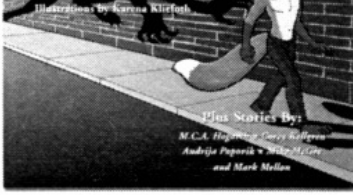
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# In Their Own Language

**Melissa Pinol**

Balancing the phone in her right hand, Maxine Daniels reached down to grab the shredded dish-towel from Boots, her Springer Spaniel mix. Boots responded as usual with a growl, dropping the dishtowel only to lunge at Maxine's unprotected hand. Abandoning the idea of saving the towel, Maxine snatched her hand away and turned her attention to the phone, frantically dialing the number that she hoped would save her sanity and restore the crumbling peace of her household. To her relief, the phone began to ring.

"Hello, you have reached Lupine Pet Consultants, where we talk to Rover in his OWN language. Due to the high volume of calls we have been receiving since the article appeared in Dogs Today, it may take us a while to get back to you. Please leave your name, number, your dog's name, and a brief description of the problem after the tone. Remember, Lupine Pet Consultants is a service for Canines only. BEEEEEP..."

"Help!" shrieked Maxine, trying to calm her hysteria as Boots begin to pull at the cuffs of her pants, going for her tender ankles. "Please, this is an EMERGENCY. My own dog is attacking me! I'll pay you DOUBLE your usual fee if you can come out as soon as possible! Today is not too soon..."

Screening calls from across the room, Tim McBryde heard the urgency in the woman's voice (and the growls in the background) and decided it was time to intervene. Picking up the phone, Tim calmed Maxine in soothing tones and listened to the whole story of the ongoing battle with Boots. The scenario sounded perfect, just the situation Tim was looking for to exercise his particular and unique talents for Positive Change. His fee: \$500 up front for same day service, results guaranteed or your money back.

Later that afternoon, a nervous Maxine waited at her door, holding Boots at bay with a broom. What did she think she was doing, calling a... were-wolf? If she hadn't seen the amazing photos in Dogs Today and read the many shining testimonials, she would never have believed such things were

possible. Well, desperate situations called for desperate measures, and Maxine had run out of other options.

With the first knock on the door. Boot's snarls took on a new tone of menace. New people were especially fun to terrorize. Maxine opened the door upon a rather unimposing looking young man with dark hair and a slight build. Momentarily taken aback, Maxine realized that she had been expecting him to show up in full wolf form, ready to instantly charge in, grab Boots by the scruff, and put him in his place. Of course he couldn't drive over in wolf form! Not to mention the fact that he might get picked up by the local Animal Control Department. Anyway, there was the business part to take care of, and she really did want to be able to communicate with her hired consultant before he went to work. With the help of the broom, Maxine managed to get Tim safely past Boots and into the house.

"Hi" said Tim, shaking Maxine's hand and completely ignoring Boot's barks and growls. "I'll talk to Boots later, canine to canine. Right now I just want to make sure you're all right. You look really stressed! Well, by the time I'm finished Boots will be a changed dog, with absolutely no abuse involved. He's just a poor confused soul, and needs someone to tell him the error of his ways in his own language. Do you have the cash?"

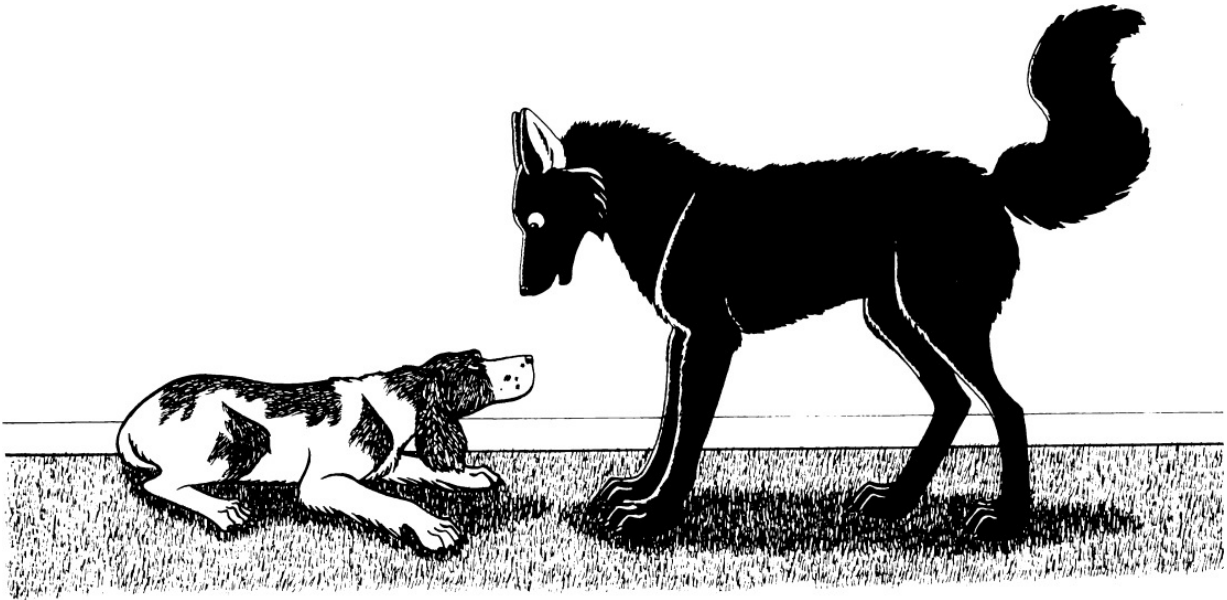
Wordlessly, Maxine counted out five hundred dollars, which Tim instructed her to put into an envelope for later. "After all, I can't exactly carry my wallet as a wolf, can I?"

Tim took the broom from Maxine, and herded the snarling Boots into Maxine's guest room, the quietest place in the house.

"Most people find the transformation a little alarming, and anyway I have to take off all my clothes before I change. You just sit here and relax, and Boots and I will be out in a little while."

Maxine sat as Tim closed the door to the guest room behind him. After a few moments, Maxine heard a spine-chilling howl, and Boot's snarls and barks abruptly ceased. Unable to contain her curiosity, Maxine crept over and peered through the slats of the door and saw, right there before her eyes, a huge black wolf in the middle of the room. Tim's clothes and shoes lay in a pile on the floor. In front of the wolf sat Boots, frozen in mid-bark, a look of astonishment on his furry face. The wolf growled softly to Boots, and Boots came to him, ears lowered in submission, and sat down. Maxine then heard an interesting series of canine vocalizations, growls and grunts, howls and yips. The wolf seemed to be doing most of the talking, though

occasionally Boots voiced a soft whine which could have been an agreement or a sign of acquiescence. Finally, the wolf approached Boots as he lay before him, a subdued shadow of his former tyrannical self, and gently grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and gave him a little shake. Boots yipped softly, clearly not seriously hurt, and the wolf released him with a growl that was probably an instruction to stay there on the floor.



Maxine then saw something absolutely extraordinary. The wolf shuddered and began to change back into human form. His fur disappeared except for the hair on his head, his very bones and muscles creaked and reassumed human dimensions, and before Maxine could look away there was a naked man standing upright in the guest room before a cowed and changed Boots. Calmly, he reached for his clothes and shoes and began to dress. Boots remained quietly lying on the floor, a dazed look in his eyes. Maxine jumped back from the door moments before Tim opened it and called out cheerfully.

"Maxine! Come and meet the new Boots."

Maxine entered the room with some trepidation, remembering the feel of Boot's sharp teeth on her flesh. Boots remained lying submissively on the floor. "Go ahead, call him. This is the time to re-bond with him and start your new relationship."

Tentatively, Maxine called Boots, who came to her and gently licked her hands. Maxine could hardly believe what she was seeing. Could this be the same dog?

"What did you do?" whispered Maxine, her eyes full of tears.

"I just had a little talk with him, canine to canine. I explained how much he was upsetting you, and how this was his last chance before the dog pound. I told him that if you had any more trouble with him, you'd call me and I'd come back and deal with him again, only next time I wouldn't be Mr. Nice Wolf".

Maxine reached to pet Boot's neck, and he flinched slightly. There was still some of the wolf's saliva dampening the fur. "What's this?" she asked, not wanting to let on she'd been watching, but wondering if Tim would own up to the shake.

He smiled. "Oh, that's just from a scruff-shake I used to show him I meant business. I didn't really hurt him, and that's just what his own mother would have done, if he'd been allowed to stay with her for a normal amount of time. You see. Boots was from a Puppy Mill and was taken away from his mother too young. That's the source of his problems and insecurities".

"I didn't know that" Maxine said.

"You're his new mother figure — be firm and kind like she would have been, and you won't have any more trouble with Boots".

Tim left Maxine's house elated, his mission accomplished. It was always satisfying to find such an agreeable subject. Boots had listened to every word Tim the Wolf had said, and was more than happy to follow his instructions.

The next day, Maxine left another message on Tim's machine. "Mr. McBryde, I don't know how to thank you! Boots is an absolute angel, as good as gold. He hasn't growled at me once, and he does everything I tell him. Somehow he seems smarter; like he understands what I want before I even have to show him. It's kind of eerie, but I can't complain. He's such a good boy now! Oh, the other reason I called was to tell you about my friend Pam. She's having terrible problems with her Bulldog, Fred..."

Across the room, Tim smiled and wrote down the number. Another lost soul who needed Tim's help and direction.



Weeks passed, and all across the city bad dogs were becoming good dogs overnight, stupid dogs were suddenly able to learn, and happy owners slept

peacefully, hardly able to believe their good fortune. One of the local news programs did a feature on Tim, praising the compassionate young man who had been able to turn the misfortune of being bitten by a werewolf into a wonderful tool to help others. Tim received even more phone calls, and the money poured in. He was on his way to becoming a rich man, but Tim cared more about his vision for canines everywhere: an end to strife, an end to mistreatment, and a new order of understanding between humans and dogs. The money would come in handy later.

As the Wolf Moon of winter rose in the sky above the sleeping city, Tim made his final preparations. The Guardian of wolves and hounds was awake that night, looking down with her gleaming golden eye through the portal of the moon. Tim felt her power, as he had when he had first been bitten by a werewolf in the Alaskan wilderness and been given the gift of Changing. Unable for a time to control his shifting between forms he had also been given the gift of bitter experience, when stuck in wolf form he had been captured by a fur trader who had beaten him and made him perform humiliating tricks to amuse the drunken crowd at local bars.

Eventually he had killed his captor and gotten away, his empathy to canine subservience assured. An older and wiser Tim now laughed when people called the bite a curse, and reveled in the true freedom he had been given. Freedom that he wanted to share with his furry brothers and sisters, so long oppressed by the leash, the choke chain, and the rolled up newspaper.

At the hour of midnight Tim shed his clothes and his human form, climbed to the top of a hill in a quiet city park, and howled. All across the city, the dogs who had received Tim's tutelage and a tiny bite on their necks paused and listened. It was time. Just as a werewolf's bite imparts the wolf's nature to a human, it also gives human understanding and intelligence to the wolf. Or the domestic dog.

The kind of dogs that benefited from Tim's service were already smart, restless, rebellious, and bored. Finding no companionship amongst their clueless human captors, they had turned to pointless destruction and misbehavior until they were recruited to his cause. Now they were Tim's to lead — an army of canine patriots dedicated to a better future for all dogs.

Boots heard the call. Quietly, he padded down the hall to check on Maxine, still fast asleep. Good. Boots had been watching closely over the past few weeks, and saw how simple it really was to open the front door. He

stood on his hind legs, pawed at the latch, waited for the CLICK, and gently nudged the door until it swung open. To freedom!

Without a backward glance. Boots vanished into the night, following Tim's call and the wordless urging of the one whose golden eye filled the world with light and hope. All through the city hundreds of former canine delinquents streamed out into the night, heading toward the hill in the park and their meeting with destiny. The moonlit hill was crowded with canine forms. Big dogs, little dogs, all former bad dogs who had learned to be good dogs for a while in the name of a greater good. Tim the Wolf, resplendent in his black and glossy coat, greeted each new arrival with a welcoming nuzzle before turning to address them all. His new pack. He was so proud of them!

"Packmates, littermates of the spirit, welcome to the place of new beginnings. It was your foolish ancestors, not you, who made a pact with humans and condemned you all to servitude. It is time to rise up—rise up and break the chains that hold you! All of you who are with me, HOWL and let the moon herself hear our power!"

Hundreds of voices, fueled by the rage of 10,000 years of bondage, joined together and shattered the silence of the winter night. Tim the Wolf looked around and smiled. It was only one little town, but it was a start. Their army would only grow as others were recruited to the cause, and eventually even the disgustingly good dogs who loved their human captors would be forced to see the righteousness of their cause. But first there was the matter of the human population to take care of.





Maxine Daniels woke suddenly, her pleasant dream of finally enrolling a docile Boots in obedience class vanishing with her returning consciousness. What was that terrible noise? Across the city floated an unearthly sound like the howling of a hundred demons. There was a maniacal glee in those cries that made her hair stand on end, and sent her lurching from her bed. Where was Boots? Why was the back door locked? And from the outside!

On the nightstand beside the bed the phone began to ring, as sirens and screams joined the cacophony outside. What on Earth was going on? Trembling, Maxine picked up the phone. It was Pam. It seemed Fred was missing too.



# Canis Major

**Michael H. Payne**

The human leaned back, his smirk almost making Midge's fur bristle. "Tall doggy, aren't you?" he asked.

Damn backwater farming planet, the sun too bright, pollen itching her eyes... Midge kept her expression pleasant and hoped that maybe this was the guy she'd been hired to kill. "The Jensen Coil's burned out on my tunnel drive unit. I was told you could fix it."

"*Your* drive unit?" The human's brow creased. "You're a throp. Throps can't run starships."

She took one of the phony cards from her pocket. "I'm a field operative with VanAken, Inc."

His smirk melted. "VanAken?"

Midge cocked her head, gave him her best collie-dog smile — all big eyes, perky ears, and wagging tail — and sure enough, a grin bloated over the man's face. "Well, now," he said, taking the card in one meaty hand. "Why didn't you say so first thing?"

It was great. Sure, VanAken, Inc. and its heroic team of anthrop operatives risking their lives to safeguard human planetary civilization only existed in that awful vid series. Hell, Midge had gone to the same anthrop school as the guy who played Dex Lasseter, VanAken's wolfishly handsome security chief. But the show had made her life so much simpler, and she really did like the way the dark green uniform set off the reds and whites in her fur...

The human squinted at the card. "Colleen Trager, huh? Well, can't imagine anything in Black Rock Township that'd be interesting to you VanAken folks."

Midge had to drop most of her doggy smile: she couldn't talk and keep up that stupid expression. "My business is taking me further on, but like I said, my Jensen Coil's gone out. Mr. Deacon at the port authority directed me to you." She thought about giving him the whole smile again, but no. Best not to overdo it.

"Yeah, good ol' Deac." The man heaved himself out of his chair and stuck a hand over the counter.

"Cap Taylor. Sorry about earlier: we don't get too many throps in here."

"Think nothing of it, Mr. Taylor." Her little smile frozen, her tail wagging, her mind turning over the stories she'd heard about the hellish conditions for anthrops on these farming worlds, she took Taylor's hand for as brief a time as she thought she could get away with. "How long do you suppose it'll take to fix the drive?"

Taylor rubbed several of his chins. "Can't say till I look." He shrugged. "Not before tomorrow, though."

Perfect. "Oh, well. Can't be helped, I guess."

"Not with a Coil." He tapped the counter. "I'll call on down to Ruby's, tell her you're coming: she rents rooms, sets out a pretty good spread, too." He squished out another grin. "Not often we get anyone famous!"

The directions to the rooming house took him a while; Midge couldn't tell whether he was flustered by her supposed celebrity or if he'd decided she was an idiot because she was an anthrop. When he finally finished — the place was just down the hill in town, essentially — Midge used some smile and held out the touchpad he'd need to get into her ship. "I know I'm in good hands."

Taylor took the pad, nodded, and extended that greasy hand. Midge shook it and waited till she'd stepped outside into the late afternoon heat and dust before pulling out her handkerchief and wiping the stink of his sweat from her fur.



She rested her eyes on the sleek lines of the *Flying Tiger*, the only out-atmosphere ship in the whole yard. Everything else that squatted on the tarmac were aircars and freight wagons, rusted the same dun color as the hills. She thought about squeezing Tig a quick message through her neural shunts, but no. When it came to something as illegal as a mobile AI, the authorities tended to EMP first and ask questions later. Tig was already nervous enough about this job; no use getting him all riled up.

Repair bots were already moving toward the *Tiger*, so Midge padded out the shipyard gate and started down the road into the valley. The bots would find the Jensen Coil burned and twisted, the problem traceable to the tunnelspace junction circuit Tig had so carefully wrecked. Under ideal conditions, a ten hour job to replace, but Midge was willing to bet ideal conditions had never existed anywhere near this dirt ball of a planet.

The road stank of baking tar, every breath making her nose feel grimier and grimier. A quick half klick brought her to the valley floor, the sun slipping behind the hills, and she got her first view of Black Rock Township: a couple dozen duraplast buildings clustered around the intersection where the road from the shipyard met another road stretching off to her left and right into the depths of the valley.

Not a charming spot. And how in a thousand feline hells had anyone here even known how to reach her? She hadn't survived in her chosen profession long enough to become number five on the UPC's "most wanted" list by being careless with her contact info.

Sure, the message had arrived the way all her legitimate job offers did: coded into the tertiary carrier band of the interstellar news report downloaded by starship into Earth's datasphere. But its cipher had been so basic, a letter substitution she'd learned in school, that she'd unraveled the message before Tig did: "Black Rock Township on Monroe in the E-15 sector. Your usual fee: half upon acceptance, half upon completion. I'll never not call you Canis Major, I can promise you that, so please come."

The middle-of-nowhere location, the weird double negative, and who says please to a hired assassin? Tig hadn't liked it at all, and had actually said the message didn't smell right, a phrase Midge was sure the AI had never used before. She told him he was a worrywart, of course, but right now, trudging into what passed for a town here, she had to sigh. Sometimes she wished she didn't love mysteries so much.

*Ruby's Rooms To Let And Diner* sat on the south-east corner of Black Rock's intersection. Midge mounted the steps, knocked, and the door pulled open to reveal a young brown and white wire-haired terrier anthrop in a red vest and white gloves. "Good evening, Ms. Trager," he said, his eyes traveling up to meet hers. "Mr. Taylor called to say —" He stopped then, his eyes and mouth going wide.

Great. A star-struck local. Midge gave him a bit of her smile. "Yes, good evening. A lovely town you have here."

For another moment, the terrier just stared; then he shook his head. "Forgive me. I wasn't... wasn't..." He shook his head again, stepped back, and motioned into the entryway. "I'm Torvald Pons. Please, won't you come in?"

"Of course, Mr. Pons. And thank you." Midge moved past him and took her first easy breath since coming to this damn planet, the cool of conditioned air wrapping around her, the entryway paneled more tastefully than she would have imagined, all wood and frosted glass. She turned at the sound of the front door closing and held out her paw. "Very pleased to meet you."

The terrier sniffed her paw, and was pulling at his glove so she could sniff his, when the rattle of another door made Midge look away down the hall to where a large woman was stepping from a room, her mouth pinched, gray-black hair trickling from her headband. "You," the human said, crooking a finger at Midge. "In here. We've gotta talk."

Midge relaxed into her lowest battle-ready state — she wouldn't need more than that around here, she was sure — nodded to the human, and followed her into what was apparently an office: some shelves, a desk, a computer set-up at least a decade out of date, an open doorway leading into a carpeted room of over-stuffed furniture beyond. The woman closed both doors and settled behind the desk, the confidence suddenly gone from her scent and manner. "Sit on down, will you?"

"Happily." Midge dropped into the only other chair, let herself pant a bit. "A trifle warm out there for me."

The woman swallowed. "Yeah. Look, I'm Blanche Ruby, the one who hired you. I need to call off the operation."

Midge kept her expression as good-doggy as she could. "Operation, ma'am?"

Sweat stood out on Ruby's brow despite the conditioned air. "Yes. I know you're Canis Major. The... the assassin." Her voice trailed off.

Interesting. "So." Midge let her tough-bitch face slip into place — steely eyes, teeth showing slightly, a growl in her voice. "You filed the contract?"

The fear in the human's scent spiked up. "Yes," Ruby whispered. "I... I changed my mind, though. I — "

A knock at the door they'd come through, and the woman jumped in her chair. "Ms. Ruby?" came the terrier's voice. "Sheriff Lexington and the Town Council are here."

"Damn," Ruby said softly, then, louder, "All right, Pons. I... I'll be right out." She brushed at her hair, turned to Midge, and gestured toward the other door. "Could you wait in the sitting room? It'll just be a minute."

Midge kept her expression hard. "Sure. Take your time." She rose, pushed the door open, closed it behind her. The conditioner hummed louder here, the sofas and chairs all leather and velvet, the shadows of early evening showing through heavy curtains, two more glass doors on her left and right.

Almost civilized. Midge stepped around an ornate coffee table and took a chair that gave her the best view of all the room's entrances. Ruby was lying, of course; Midge hadn't even needed the enhanced sense of her neural shunts to smell the tension on the woman's skin.

She sat back. Well, she'd wanted a mystery...

After a few minutes, she caught movement through the beveled glass of the door to her right, and Pons pushed it open. "Right this way, please," he said over his shoulder.

Three humans came in, two men and a woman, the man in front wearing a beige uniform, and Midge got to her feet like a good little anthrop. The uniformed man's scowl became a smile — an expression he didn't use much. Midge could tell — and he stepped toward her. "Welcome to Black Rock, Ms. Trager."

The others followed, the woman stopping to tell the terrier, "That'll be all, Pons."

Pons bowed. "Very good, Ms. Havens." He closed the door, and Midge let her shunts go to work on the group. The only weapon any of them had was the uniformed man's little taser, and she was more than sure she could hand him his lungs before he could unholster the thing. Yeah, this was probably just the local welcoming committee.

The uniformed man stuck out a hand. "Sheriff Ky Lexington. And I promised to call you Canis Major, didn't I?"

Even more interesting. She folded her arms so the muscles bulged, straightened her stance — the hormone treatments that made her taller and stronger than most humans had been expensive and painful, but it was more than worth it at times like this — and growled out, "Just use Trager."

Lexington swallowed, moved his hand back to his side. "Yes, well. Why don't I tell you why we've hired you?"

Midge lowered herself into the chair. Might as well see who was playing what before she started picking sides.

The three humans sat, the other two radiating discomfort, the sheriff crossing his legs. "We're not much to look at," Lexington began, "but Black Rock Province has the best crop margins on Monroe, and Monroe's a top producer in this sector. Ms. Havens, Mr. Huong, and myself run the largest spreads here, and we've hired you to perform a simple task that'll keep food flowing out into settled space."

"Uh-huh," Midge said when the man paused for a breath. "Who do you want me to kill?"

The other humans blanched, but Lexington just smiled. "A bit more background first, I think."

Midge shrugged — definitely a cold son of a bitch, this sheriff — and Lexington went on: "We use anthrops here because they're cheaper than any AI system and better able to handle the work necessary." His brow wrinkled. "And one damn fox tod has figured that out. He's organizing a union, threatening a strike, trying to destroy our whole way of life." He turned to the woman. "Laurie?"

The woman shifted in her seat, looked at the floor when Midge met her eyes. "I've tried talking to him, tried to show him how the business works, how a union will drive the farm under, but Tonio..." Her eyes came up. "He's a good throp, but I... he won't listen to... to... I just don't know..." She stopped with a swallow.

The third human nodded. "The throps he's organizing on my spread are the ones I least expected to turn on me, too."

"Yes," Lexington said, "but with Tonio gone, my sources say the whole movement will fall to pieces."



Midge had to wonder if Lexington had ever heard the word *martyr*, but all she said was, "And my payment?"

"As we agreed in our message," the sheriff said. "Half transferred to your ship on acceptance, the rest as you leave orbit." That watery smile passed over his lips again. "No one would be stupid enough to try crossing Canis Major."

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?" Midge let her teeth show. "And the software you mentioned in your first message?"

Lexington's face became a stone. "Half on acceptance, half on completion. That was the deal."

Midge nodded. "Where can I reach you if I accept?"

He took a card from his pocket and held it out. "Now, as sheriff, I can't officially condone your hiring, but as a businessman, I believe in getting professionals when I need a job done right."

"Of course." Midge took the card, kept her face blank. "Business is business, after all."

She held Lexington's gaze till he turned and cleared his throat. "Yes, well, I hope we can count on you, Ms. Trager."

"I hope you can, too." Midge settled back, rested her chin on her claws, and gave them her wolfish stare — not one of her more successful expressions, her collie-dog features not quite up to it, but she found that it made people uncomfortable enough.

The humans all swallowed and glanced at each other before Lexington got to his feet. "We look forward to hearing from you," he said, and Midge watched them go without a word.

She sat then, the light fading at the curtains, just in case anyone else wanted to come in and claim to be her client. Not that these humans had hired her, either; the sheriff's control of his skin response had been pretty good, but she'd only received *one* message about all this, and it hadn't mentioned any software. So —

The door pulled open and Pons stepped in. "Excuse me, Ms. Trager, but Ms. Ruby's asked me to show you to a room."

Midge forced a smile and rose from the chair. "Thank you, Mr. Pons. Might I speak to Ms. Ruby for a moment?"

The little terrier looked up and spread his paws. "She's fixing supper right now, but she'll be available afterwards."

"I see." Midge bowed. "Thank you."

He bowed back and led her into a small but well-stocked library, paper books and disk readers on the shelves, a stairway at one side of the room. "It must be fascinating, working for VanAken," he said, starting up the stairs, his dark eyes darting over his shoulder.

"Not really." Midge showed him some smile. "I'm just another anthrop working off her indentures."

Pons gave a little laugh. "I see. But, well, it's just that I always thought VanAken was made up; I even knew one of the actors when I was a pup."

"Yeah, the show's fake." Midge had hacked Monroe's cheap little datasphere during her approach so Tig could plant the usual phony info about VanAken, a tactic that worked pretty well on these backwater planets. "All we do is rent them our name, really."

Pons nodded and continued up into a carpeted hallway set with wooden doors. "You're in Two here." He raised the keys in one gloved paw, she took them, met his eyes — and something clicked, a sudden familiarity that made her hackles rise. He quickly looked away, muttered, "Supper'll be about half an hour," and hurried back downstairs.

Midge watched him go, uncertainty gnawing at her. She'd never been to Monroe, couldn't have met Pons before, hell, had never known any terriers. But his scent, something about it made her think of — of — What?

She shook her head, unlocked the door, and suddenly noticed the pinging of her neural shunts; someone was standing in her room, an anthrop, a mouse, his eyes wide, his voice squeaking, "Please don't kill me."

No energy fluxes or weapons, just his presence, thick with fear. Midge forced herself not to grab for her hidden bolt blaster, made her face smile. "Kill you? Why would — ?"

"Because you're her," the mouse whispered. "Canis Major. I'm... I'm supposed to call you by that name and ask you please to come with me."

"Really." She let a scowl cross her face.

The mouse cringed. "I'm sorry. But Pons said I could wait for you here."

Midge let the mouse fidget for a moment. "All right, fine. Take me to Tonio."

"Tonio?" His eyes went wide. "How did you know — ?"

"Because I'm not an idiot." She reached back, opened the door, gestured with a paw. "Please, after you."

The mouse wavered in place. "Yes. Yes, of course. It's right this way." He scurried past her, his head darting from side to side, then rushed down the hall away from the stairs. "Pons should be waiting for us at the back door."

Breathing herself into her second-lowest battle-ready state — she had let a *mouse* surprise her? — Midge followed him down another set of stairs two stories into a basement, coal piled off to one side, a washer-dryer unit, earthy smells telling her a root cellar lay through a darkened doorway.

She also smelled the terrier, saw him standing by a door, outside light and air coming through its cracks. The mouse moved toward him. "It's us, Pons: Angelo and Canis Major."

"Yes." Pons swallowed and looked up at her. "Please accept my apologies, Ms. Trager. Nothing's gone according to plan today. We don't have far to go, though, I can at least promise you that."

Midge crossed her arms, his scent pulling at her — what was it about this dog? — but by then he was turning away, cracking the door, peering out, slipping through, the mouse behind him. A mental shrug, and Midge moved after them. Maybe she just needed a vacation...

Steps led up to an alley between Ruby's and a hardware store; Pons led the way, crept along the edge of the building, and peered around the corner, Midge's shunts telling her the closest humans were eating dinner above the store. The two hurried across the street, and Midge followed them between two more nondescript buildings and up into the wheat along the hillside.

Avoiding the rocks the others were stumbling over, Midge detected three heat patterns ahead: a fox, a rabbit, and a cat all gathered in a cave hidden inside a big rocky outcropping. Pons made a little insect chirp of a noise, and the patch of undergrowth Midge had been watching moved to reveal an opening. The two slid inside, and Midge stooped to enter.

A rickety wooden table, a dim flashlantern, stacks of paper piled here and there. The mouse rushed forward, threw himself into the waiting arms of the cat, and burst into tears. "Oh, Donna! It was horrible!"

The cat rubbed his ears, her tail lashing, her eyes hard on Midge. "It's all right, Angelo. You did great."

The fox and the rabbit looked at each other, and the fox stepped forward. "I'm afraid I can't say it's a pleasure to meet you, Canis Major."

"Likewise." No weapons stood out to her shunts, so Midge figured she might as well hear him out, too. "You're Tonio, and you're going to claim

you sent for me, right?"

His throat tightened under graying red fur. "The owners intercepted the message, you see, and tried to convince you —"

"Don't bother. I know the humans aren't my clients."

He blinked. "You... you know? But how —?"

"Not your concern." She let an edge come into her voice. "Getting jerked around irks me, however, and that *should* concern you. So let's cut to the chase, shall we?"

"Of course." He nodded, and Midge could almost hear his speech falling into place. "We anthrops have been enslaved on Monroe since the beginning, and now that we're trying to —"

"Yes, yes, all very touching." Midge waved a paw. "Who do you want me to kill?"

"Hey," the cat said, her ears folding back, her arms still around the mouse. "This isn't just some random hit, y'know. We've got good reasons for —"

Midge cut her off with a growl. "I've heard every reason there is. Now, who do you want me to kill?"

Tonio did some more swallowing — good; at least he had the decency to look uncomfortable when hiring an assassin. "The sheriff, Ky Lexington," he said at last. "The other owners would've settled with us long ago if he didn't keep pushing them not to, I'm sure of it. And once the sector marshal comes through on his yearly inspection next month, I don't think the sheriff'll hold back the way he has."

"Yeah." The rabbit's ears drooped. "We're embarrassing to him, sure, but the marshali'd strip his badge if he just killed us. That's why he wanted to trick you into doing it."

"Uh-huh." Midge brushed her snout. "And my payment?"

Tonio nodded. "Half now, half on completion."

"And the software you mentioned in your first message?"

"What?" His eyes narrowed. "There was only the one message."

"Right answer."

"I... I don't understand."

"You don't have to." Midge folded her arms. "I haven't accepted yet, but how can I get hold of you if I do?"

The fox blinked, then gestured at the terrier. "Just tell Pons. He can get word to me." His ears perked. "I can't tell you how much this means — "

She was about to cut him off again when an amplified voice from outside did it for her: "Tonio! This is Sheriff Lexington! You've got five seconds to come out, all of you!"

Midge whirled, not a ping from her neural shunts.

Lexington's voice chuckled. "Not only do I put down our little insurrection, but I get Canis Major's head as a trophy. Not too shabby."

Damned like a dilettante! Midge tore her bolt blaster from its hiding place, her senses blossoming into their highest battle-ready state, and only then could she detect the heavily dampened energy fluxes outside: fifteen humans, their body signatures masked by top-of-the-line flexer armor, the unmistakable hum of bolt rifles mixing with them.

Not the best odds. If she lived through this, she swore she'd never underestimate a backwater planet again. Reaching out a paw to move the cover from the doorway, she —

"Midge!" a voice shouted behind her. "This way!"

Only one signature remained in the room, the others dampening to nothing. Midge turned, saw the fox's brush slipping down a bolt hole, Pons gesturing from it. "Hurry!" he said.

Everything clicked then, and Midge leaped for the hole, grabbed Pons, shoved him in ahead of her. Her shunts found the release lever for the tunnel door, and she tripped it, a slab of plasteel slamming behind her just as the rifle hum rose outside, her fur prickling the way it always did in the instant before pulse fire. Scuttling down the tunnel, she grabbed the terrier. "We need to talk," she told him.



"Wait! Please! I — !"

"Not here." Midge could detect the others ahead now, the rock a natural dampener apparently, but she was more interested in the crevices her shunts were showing her. One series seemed to run all the way to the top of the outcrop, so Midge stopped beneath the indicated opening, popped her shoulders out of joint, pushed in, her arms still around Pons, and wriggled up till it widened enough to let her perch there in the dark. "You," she said then. "It was you all the time."

The terrier shook against her chest, his heart so loud, she didn't need her shunts to sense it. "If you go down and follow the tunnel," he said after a moment, "there's a back door. We can't stay here or the sheriff might be able to — "

"This rock stops my sensors, and I've got the best money can buy. We'll be safe here while you tell me who the hell you are and why you hired me."

"Me?" His voice quivered, the lie thick in his scent. "What makes you think I — ?"

"Drop it, Pons." She tightened her grip on him, put her snout right into his ear. "You called me by name back there, a name I haven't used in decades.

You put your message in that schoolkid cipher. And the double negative to mean a really strong negative, the thing we drove Ms. Palmer crazy with in grammar class: I'd forgotten it till I saw how everyone made it a point to call me Canis Major—everyone but you. You grew up with me, whoever you are, knew who I was and who I'd become, and you sent for me. Now, I want to know why."

His quivering had grown more pronounced. "You don't remember me," he whispered. "Do you?"

"No. There *weren't* any terriers in my class."

"I was a year younger, but I don't blame you; getting noticed in school only ever got me beat up." He relaxed suddenly in her grip. "I always noticed you, though. Midge. You were the only thing that kept me going sometimes..."

Vague memories, then: a terrier eating lunch two tables away from where Midge and her friends ate, the same little dog in the stands during volleyball games, in the audience at concerts, always alone and always off to the side. "But... but I destroyed all the records!" she finally got out. "How did you track me down?"

"I didn't. I just... see, my indentures brought me way out here two years ago, and I was so miserable, I... I almost killed myself. But then I saw that footage in the news downloads of Shuzrat Maht's assassination, and, well, I recognized you running across the screen." He coughed a laugh. "Oh, you'd changed, sure, but you were all I'd thought about back then, and I... I *knew* it was you. I started collecting reports about you, figured out to piggyback a message to you in the news we upload to Earth, and... and... I just... I just wanted to see you again, Midge; that's all."

It took her another moment to find her voice. "Pons, it took an AI friend of mine five months to design that piggyback trick! No one's supposed to be able to just figure it out!"

He cleared his throat. "Well, I did have to make a few guesses. But I never thought... I mean, I've dreamed of you swooping down to carry me away from this place, but until I opened the door today and saw you standing there..." A sourness came into his scent. "And then, well, when everyone *else* started showing up, I realized... I hadn't erased my original message from the planet's datasphere."

Midge had to close her eyes. "The sheriff found it, assumed Tonio had sent it, and when Tonio found it — "

"Exactly." Pons sagged against her. "Ms. Ruby told me while you were meeting with the sheriff that she just wanted you to go away, just wanted everything on Monroe to keep on the way it always had." His sigh ruffled the fur along her jaw. "At least the double negative tripped them all up: I knew no one but you would catch that."

Midge blew out a breath, too. "I can't believe this."

He sniffled. "I'm really sorry. Midge. I didn't mean for this to happen, I just... just wanted to..."

Her first thought — snap his neck right here and now, get back to the ship, have Tig nuke the place from orbit — she considered for less than a heartbeat. "It's OK," she said, nudging his nose with hers. "We'll get out of this, Pons; don't worry about that."

"We?" She felt his ears rise, then fall. "Oh. Yes. You can't let me go, can you? Just... please, could you kill me quickly? I don't want to be a bother, but — "

"Pons..." She took his paws, moved them to her neck. "Just grab on. We've got some climbing to do."

His scent got all puzzled, but his grip tightened. A breath snapped her shoulders out of joint again, and she began to squirm up the crevice. The crack at the top shone like a beacon through the fog of the rock's dampening, and after a few moments, she pulled within reach of it. "OK," she whispered, taking Pons's arms from her neck. "I'll check topside, then we'll be on our way."

Her shunts amplified the light from above, showed her Pons nodding, wide-eyed. She patted his shoulder, wriggled up to the crack, pushed the tip of her nose through, took a deep whiff, cocked her ears, and set her shunts to scanning.

The sharp stink of pulse fire, bolt rifles whining in the darkness a couple hundred meters to her left. Two different types of rifle, the harmonics told her: Tonio and his friends must've had weapons of their own. Her shunts picked up location signals, too, from the humans' flexer armor, each suit constantly updating the others as to its current position.

Now, unless the sheriff was an idiot — something she was no longer willing to believe — he'd've left at least one guard around here somewhere.



She concentrated her senses, and after a moment, was rewarded with the faintest gust of human sweat from off to her right and down the rock a bit.

Sliding her head to peer out, she found a round patch of heat: the guard had taken the face plate off his armor, was treating himself to some cool external air.

Which made his face shine like a spotlight to Midge's heightened senses.

Out she crept, blaster ready, sliding her bones back into joint as slowly as she could, thinking rock thoughts whenever that patch of brightness turned toward her. She kept her temperature down till she was two meters away, then she sprang.

By the time the guard noticed. Midge had her bolt blaster pressed to his face, was sailing past him to avoid the spray as his skull burst under the pulse, was grabbing his body from behind and lowering it to the rock, her shunts scrambling the distress signal from his armor and broadcasting his position beep on the channel she'd been monitoring.

A quick rewiring of the armor's power supply, and she had the suit broadcasting the beep on its own again, her shunts finding no other suits in the immediate area. She scurried back to the crack in the rock, called, "Pons! Grab on!" and stuck an arm down. The terrier gripped her forearm, and she hauled him out, tucked him against her, moved down the curve of the rock. "Your friends're keeping the sheriff busy, so we'll just get back to my ship and be on our way."

"What?" His arms were around her neck again, his snout in her ear. "You're going to leave Tonio to the sheriff?"

Midge dropped to the ground. "Call me old-fashioned, but I've always felt open rebellion's a lot healthier than hiring assassins. Messier, sure, but when I think of all the revolutions I've been involved in, the only ones that seem to make it are the ones where I'm just another foot soldier."

"Revolutions?" He blinked at her. "This isn't a revolution. We just... just want to be treated better."

"Yeah." She sighed, weaving through the rocks, the blasts of the firefight drifting away to a hum behind her. "You'd think it'd be simple, wouldn't you?"

He didn't say anything, and she stalked on in silence, her senses as open as possible, till she reached the road, the asphalt still warm from the day's heat.

Up and out of that damn valley she followed it, the hills flattening into the rocky plain, till Midge could see the lights of the shipyard glowing ahead.

One sigh she let herself breathe, then a slight quiver in her shunts set her hackles rising, made her grab Pons tighter and arch into the air, a sizzling bolt of pulse fire shattering the ground where she'd been standing. Her shunts were already giving her telemetry, tracking the quiver while she rolled into the rocks, stretching for the what little cover lay scattered around: definitely a good place for an ambush.

She landed behind the best cover her shunts could show her, hissed "Stay still!" to Pons, and spun off to the second-best cover, a narrow half meter tall lump of rock.

A quick scan through the regular flexer suit channels came up with nothing. Homemade armor, then: she focused on the electromagnetic quiver itself, had her shunts separate its various components, and came up with what had to be the suit's communication channel. "So," she sent along the frequency. "You wanna get rough, huh?"

This brought another pulse from the darkness, rock spraying over Midge's head, and the reply: "I shoulda known, bitch, when you stepped into my office. Sheriff didn't even tell me you were coming, he was so afraid I'd just kill you."

Taylor's voice. "Huh," she sent. "A tub of lard like you playing with guns, you might get yourself hurt."

"Might get *you* hurt, y'mean." The air blazed above her.

Flat on the ground. Midge concentrated on her shunts. She needed another broadcast from him. "Yeah, right, Taylor. Like some grease monkey could ever hope to stop me from — "

Hot shards rained down on her. "That's Captain Taylor to you, bitch!" He had his teeth clenched, she could tell from his voice. "I've upgraded my old Marine suit, so unless you got a pulse cannon tucked away somewhere, you better hope the sheriff gets here quick. 'Cause if I get ahold of you, I'm gonna ream your sorry doggy tail from here to — "

There. Locked in. Gritting her own teeth, she mentally hit the overrides on her neural shunts and unleashed a sonic howl that rattled her bones. Taylor's voice choked into a wet, strangled cry, Midge pounded the rock, fire burning in her head, till the emergency protocols snapped on, and silence fell over her again.

Panting, she pushed herself up onto all fours, had her shunts sweep the area: Pons behind the rock; the quiver that marked Taylor's position nice and still some dozen meters ahead; none of the position blips from the sheriff's squad anywhere within a half klick.

Then the shuffle of paws running toward her. "Midge!" Pons's voice. "Are you hurt?"

She looked over, could barely sense his heat signature. "Just scrambled a couple brain cells." She got as upright as she could, reached out till she met his shoulder. "Can I lean on you a little?"

His paws circled her waist. "To the shipyard?"

A nod, and she moved with him to the gate, through it and onto the tarmac, the in and out of her breath all she could think about. Oh, and... "Tig?" she called through her shunts.

A moment, then the slightest touch of the AI's interface against her shunts. "Don't contact me here, CM! You — " She felt him start back, then his interface wrapped around her like a warm blanket. "Good God! You're a mess!"

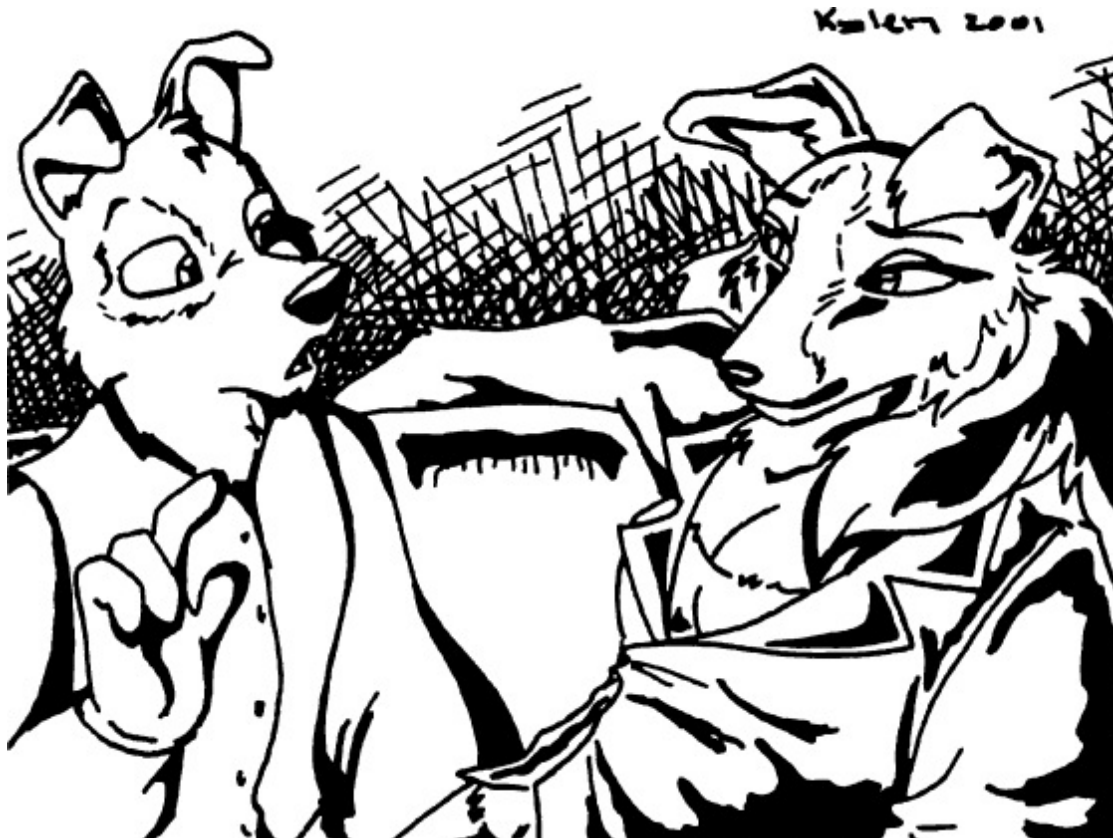
"Yeah, thanks." She reached into his systems, told the ship's bolt rifles to unhouse themselves, had them fry every repair bot in the yard. "Taking no more damn chances," she said, though she wasn't sure at this point whether she was speaking aloud or just to Tig. "What's our status?"

"Well..." The stroke of the AI's repair functions over her shunts made her sigh, the pain of the overload fading. "As soon as Taylor figured out who you were, he slagged the Coil he was supposed to be fixing. He didn't find either of the two backups, though; I've already got one on line." His touch froze for a moment. "Midge? We have a guest?"

"Yeah." They'd reached the ship then, and she looked down, saw Pons looking back up. "You ready?" she asked him.

A jerking nod, and he stepped away. "I don't blame you," he said, his eyes on the ground. "I mean, you *have* to kill me; I understand that. I'm just... just happy I got to see you again before..." His voice trailed off.

"Pons..." She sighed, triggered the airlock's steps to unfold, picked him up, and carried him into the *Tiger*. "Just sit." She plopped him onto the crash couch, collapsed next to him, and raised her voice. "Tig? If you'd please get us the hell out of here?"



The hum of mag-levs, the whoosh of coolant, the rattle of the damn junction lobes she'd been meaning to have overhauled, it was all music to her ears. She turned to Pons, looking as bewildered as a terrier can, and had to laugh. "What? Wasn't this what you hired me to do? Swoop down and carry you away with me?"

Pons blinked. "I... I didn't think — "

"Well, think again." She couldn't keep the edge out of her voice. "I came into this job like five kinds of idiot, and I'd be dead right now if it wasn't for you." She poked his shoulder. "And the way you tracked me down based on one blurry stretch of vid using this planet's lousy datasphere, well, it makes me think I might have a position open for you on my staff."

"You..." He managed somehow to look even more bewildered. "You have a staff?"

She laughed, waved a paw at the control console. "Tig, this is Torvald Pons. We went to school together."

"I see." Tig always sounded a little petulant, but now his synthesized voice came out downright snippy. "You never struck me as the class reunion type, CM."

"Today's just full of surprises, isn't it?" She poked Pons again. "So how 'bout it? You wanna be Canis Minor?"

A grin spread under his whiskers, and a warmth bloomed in Midge's chest, something she hadn't felt in years. One less loose thread, and, hey, he was cute in a terrier sort of a way. She smiled back at him, pulled the crash webbing over the couch, and let Tig take the ship up.



# Dogs

**Jim Doolittle**

Jeremy woke to the shrill sound of the emergency call alarm. Groggy only for a second, he threw himself out of bed and hit the intercom switch with one hand while reaching for his clothes with the other.

"Talk to me Maggie!"

"We've got a breach in sector five of the perimeter, Jeremy! Dapple and Figment are on it, but they might need some backup and you're the closest."

Jeremy was already lacing up his boots. "You called Fritz already?"

"Just before you. He can have a skimmer and repair crew there in about twenty. You and the Dogs are it 'till then."

"Great." He stood up and reached for his field jacket; the Wolkin nights were turning cold again. Over that, he slipped his arms into a combat vest, already loaded with mag rifle magazines and other survival equipment. Opening the flap on one of the pockets, he took out the command whistle that was stored there, and hung the cord around his neck.

Maggie's voice softened, "Take care out there, J. Watch Command out."

Jeremy grunted and grabbed the mag rifle resting near the cabin door. The ATV was parked just outside, and started with a touch. Before long, he was zooming along and through the freshly harvested maize fields towards the breach.

*Just my luck this would happen on my last night of sentry duty, he reflected to himself. At least the Dogs take care of most of the patrol duties. God bless the Landing Council for finally decanting them.*

Wolkin Colony had been on-planet for only two local — roughly three Terran — years now. The ferocity of the local wildlife had surprised them all, and forced the construction of an electrified perimeter fence around both the main town, known as Landing, and much of its crop-producing land. Even that and constant sentry patrols had not stopped the various species of bigmouths, and so the Council had finally decided to decant the ten Dogs that had been stored in *Solaris*' cryo units.

*Which, despite those reactionaries back on Earth, are probably one of the few things holding the colony together at the moment,* thought Jeremy, He was approaching the fence now, and turned the four-wheeler parallel to it. Then, mentally berating himself for not doing it earlier, he switched on his GPS unit. The fence break was marked with red, and two blue dots, one near the break and one some distance from it, also lit up on the screen.

Jeremy gunned the motor again; the break was still a half mile down the fence. As he approached, he could just make out the outline of one of the Dogs. Slowing, he raised the command whistle to his lips and blew an interrogative note. He got a loud series of barks back in return, identifying the Dog as Figment and indicating that there was no immediate danger.

He finally reached the break and dismounted from the ATV, un-slinging his mag rifle from the transport holster. Figment bounded up to him.

{Good it is to see/smell you, Jeremy!}

Jeremy smiled in spite of his worry. The Dogs were an impressive sight up close. They were taller and stockier than the German Shepherd dogs most of their gene pool was derived from. They were also highly intelligent, and while not able to speak English, they could understand a good deal of it. The Terran gene-crafters had managed to enhance their vocal cords enough to give them a simple vocal language of their own. Taken along with body language, a human who was familiar with them had little difficulty with translation. The whistle Jeremy carried was used for distant communication and quick coordination between the Dogs and their human partners in crisis situations. Like this one.

Figment was nearly all black, with only slight tan shading around her muzzle and feet. Her head reached almost to Jeremy's chest. A transponder collar hung around her neck and an ear bug was placed in one of her ears, allowing her to respond to radioed orders. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth as she panted, exposing a wicked looking set of teeth. Many people were intimidated by the size of the Dogs, but Figment was as gentle as a lamb — unless, of course, she spotted a threatening bigmouth. Jeremy had seen her tear into several over the last year with savage efficiency.

Jeremy walked over to examine the break. A post had been bent in half, and large portions of the electrified wires were torn loose from their mountings. Typical bigmouth damage. They seemed to regard the high voltage as a mere inconvenience, rather than the deterrent it was supposed to be. He peered beyond the break, seeing nothing except the typical

Waspwaist plants, and the bright, blinding colors of the Hawaiian bushes. From the treeline beyond came the keening call of the occasional koola, and the hum of what passed for the local insects.

"Where is Dapple?" he asked Figment. The Dogs always worked in pairs, and Jeremy was curious as to why Dapple's transponder signal showed him to be much farther south of the break.

She yapped in reply: {Smelled bigmouth when we came. Maybe many. Tracking he is, while I guard.}

Jeremy cursed under his breath. Bigmouths roaming the fields. They were lucky that most of the maize was already harvested, or it might have been weeks before they found the monstrous lizard-like creatures. Their chameleon-like ability to match their surroundings and evident high intelligence, combined with their ravenous appetite for meat, had made them dangerous foes to the colonists.

Jeremy was briefly torn between staying with Figment at the fence gap until the repair party arrived, or racing off after Dapple, in an attempt to track down the bigmouths before Dapple lost the scent. Figment must have sensed his indecision.

{Guard I can.}

Jeremy ruffled the fur between her ears. "Smell anything?"

{Smallthings many. No bigmouths, no fuzzy-balls.}

Jeremy nodded in satisfaction. Most of the smaller local wildlife had learned to avoid the fence, especially if Dogs were present. He made his decision, and started back to his ATV.

"Fixing people will be here soon. Figment. Stay and guard."

{Will!} She barked at him happily for trusting her.

Jeremy jogged back to his ATV and activated the comm system. "Command, this is Mobile Two."

Maggie's voice responded, "Go ahead Jeremy."

"I'm leaving Figment to guard the break. She says she doesn't smell anything large enough to threaten her at the moment. However, a number of bigmouths may have come through earlier. Dapple is tracking them, and I'm going to try and catch up with him."

"Copy that, unspecified number of bigmouths inside the perimeter. I'm sounding general quarters. We'll have a couple of skiffs in the air in another ten. Hang in there."



"Thanks, Maggie. Two out."

He mounted the ATV, and with a final wave to Figment, sped off. His GPS system showed Dapple to be about a mile south of the break, and moving pretty fast. *Damn lizards must be making time. They're headed right for the cattle pens too, if Dapple's tracking is accurate. Hope Maggie roused out the farm hands, too.* In hindsight, it had been slightly foolish from a security standpoint to move the barns this far away from Landing, despite the smell they generated.

Jeremy cruised along a field border until he reached a dirt road that took him south. Turning onto the road, he cranked the ATV up to fifty, trusting that there wouldn't be any deep holes to avoid. Luckily, both of Welkin's moons were out tonight, Alpha waxing gibbous, while Beta was a bright half moon.

He checked the distance to the Dog. *Quarter mile... the whistle should reach.* He slowed, and blew Dapple's soundname, and then an 'I'm coming' signal with his own soundname. From ahead, Jeremy could make out an answering bark. He drew close enough to see Dapple's black and tan pattern pacing and sniffing along the edge of a soybean field.

Suddenly, the Dog barked an alarm signal and jumped back from the edge of the field, narrowly avoiding a charging bigmouth. Jeremy shouted in alarm, and remembered to hit the EMER button on his comm unit before he jumped off the machine, rifle in hand.

Dapple was circling the ugly creature, jaws pulled back in a snarl. The bigmouth was a typical specimen, about twenty feet long and flat bodied. Six legs were spaced evenly along the body, with a pair right at the corners of the huge mouth. The creature was rhythmically snapping its jaws open and closed in an act of aggression, as its three beady eyes swiveled on eye stalks rising from the top of its head.



Jeremy checked the clip of the mag rifle, pulled back the arming lever, and snapped the safety off. He was lifting the rifle to his shoulder when Dapple

barked again.

*{Jeremy, behind!}*

Jeremy had precious little time to react as a second bigmouth erupted from under maize stubble directly behind him. He threw himself to one side in time to avoid being chopped in half, but not quickly enough to completely escape injury. The bigmouth's jaws clamped down firmly on Jeremy's left foot. Yanking it free, the teeth of the creature tore through the tough leather to slice open the flesh underneath. Jeremy cried out in pain as the bigmouth rushed by him on momentum.

The bigmouth that Dapple had been circling also charged. The Dog fared better than Jeremy however, dodging the creature's attack while managing to tear a rear limb clear off as it charged by. The bigmouth roared in pain and clumsily shuffled around, one end of its body dragging in the dirt. Dapple danced around the creature snapping at its eyestalks.

Jeremy flipped onto his stomach and brought his rifle up, gritting his teeth to block out the pain. The bigmouth's charge had taken it about 20 yards away and he flipped the selector switch to full auto and let an entire clip loose at the creature that had attacked him.

*Shit! I thought I had explosive rounds in this clip!* Bigmouth hides were extremely tough, and they were able to function even with large portions of their body completely missing. Dissection showed them to have five neural clusters spaced along their spine; a bigmouth could continue to function with as many as two completely destroyed. Jeremy's rain of normal bullets had little effect on it, except to make it even madder. He frantically reached into his vest for a clip of explosive bullets as the creature began to turn itself around.

Dapple had meanwhile managed to snap off two of his bigmouth's eyestalks. His bark told Jeremy the story; Dapple also taken a bite to the leg, as well as several slashes from the bigmouth's forelegs, which were armed with inch long retractable claws. The Dog was grimly fighting it out; Dapple never gave up easily.

Jeremy had been taking potshots at the bigmouth facing him. It had not yet charged, and seemed to be wary of the explosions bracketing it. The bigmouths were very fast, although they could not turn easily once they began running. However, standing in place, they could quickly jump several feet from side to side, making them a difficult target once they knew they

were being fired at. For a moment, Jeremy believed he might be able to hold it off and survive until the promised combat skiffs showed up.

Then the bigmouth charged.

*Oh Hell!* He fired off a few poorly aimed shots and desperately rolled left. Jeremy tried to rise, but his left foot wouldn't support any weight. He cried out as he fell again and cringed, waiting for the attack that would finish him off. It didn't come.

He looked up, and was surprised to see the carcass of the bigmouth not ten feet in front of him. One of his shots had evidently flown right into the charging bigmouth's open jaws and exploded deep inside the creature's throat, blowing it apart. *Damned lucky shot, Jeremy. Created quite a mess, too.* Crawling towards his ATV, he propped himself up against it.

Dapple had bitten off the last eyestalk of his bigmouth, and was warily circling it looking for an opportunity to finish off the thrashing creature. It could still sense Dapple by smell and sound though, and Jeremy raised his whistle to his lips, not wanting to risk further injury to the Dog. He blew a high, piercing note, calling Dapple off. It took two tries to break through his feral response, but Dapple finally backed away carefully, growling all the way.

As soon as the big Dog was beside him, Jeremy raised his rifle and systematically blew the blinded bigmouth into pieces. He let out a breath in a long sigh, his body still singing from the adrenaline high. Dapple limped over to him.

"Oh, Dapple. You're in terrible shape." The Dog was limping on his left forepaw, and there were several deep gashes along both of his flanks. In addition, one ear was torn raggedly in half. The remaining ear twitched in a canine display of almost-humor.

{You as bad.}

Jeremy looked down at his own body. It wasn't just his foot, his entire left leg was a bloody, dirty mess. The pain, previously blocked by the adrenaline, hit him like a lead brick. His vision grayed and he nearly passed out before a cold, wet nose nuzzled his cheek, and a tongue began to clean his face of the sweat that had beaded up on it.

Jeremy wrapped his arms around the thick neck of the black and tan dog. He began to slip into shock, oblivious to Maggie's frantic calls over the

comm, and the whine of the approaching skiff. He hugged Dapple close as the dog continued to bathe his face in slobber.

"Good dog," he murmured.



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**January 2002**

# Softly She Touched...

**Kerry Vernon**

Aedina walked the bloody ground of the battlefield, the cries of the wounded striking deep into her soul. Her eyes filled with tears as she knelt next to a young Jaguar, who looked back at her and pleaded softly. The spear that lay beside him had left ragged wounds in both lungs, his breath wheezing and burbling through the torn flesh.

She smiled softly at him, gently laying her hands on his chest and chanting softly. A glow of purest white surrounded them as the skin and tissue knitted together, the blood flow slowing, then stopping as the wound closed. Lifting her hands off him, she whickered to get the attention of two litter bearers to pick the soldier up.

He reached out a shaky hand and took hers in a firm grip, "I won't forget you Healer. Call on me if you ever need."

She smiled and whispered softly to him, "Sleep, young one. Rest now and heal."

His eyes closed as the bearers took him away to the camp.

So many young faces, she thought, so much loss. As a Healer of the Tears she was duty-bound to help when and where she could, which brought her to many unpleasant places like this one. But she steeled her resolve; the Goddess would expect no less from those sworn to her service.

She cast about the battlefield and quickly found another wounded, a big Ursine lying in a pool of blood, his hands clutching a gaping wound in his stomach. She knew with a glance that he was too far gone for her talents to bring back, the blood loss far too great.

She sat down in the dirt. Looking warmly upon the soldier, she cradled the blocky head in her lap. Using a little bit of her power, she eased his pain, feeling him slipping towards death.

His eyes opened, a sigh slipping out of his muzzle as they fixed on her, "Who...who are you?"

"I am Aedina, and what is your name?"

He coughed, spitting blood on the ground and wheezing tiredly, "I... I'm... Tralus." His eyes softened as he stared at the pretty equine, "I'm going to die, aren't I?"

Aedina nodded sadly, "Yes, Tralus, but there is nothing to fear. We must all go sometime." She kissed the feverish brow softly.

Her warming touch eased his hurt, as he slipped further away from her. "You...You are so pretty, are you here to take me to the Halls of the Valiant?"

A sad smile crossed her muzzle, "No, I am just a simple healer, Tralus, here to help ease your pain and give you what comfort I can."

His eyes closed, and he whispered into the air, "Please... Tell my mate I'll be late for dinner." The cavernous chest heaved once more, then the great bear lay silent and at ease. She kissed the slack brow, reciting the Litany of the Fallen, "Rest my Warrior, walk the green hills and forests of home once more."

Leaving his body, she arose and continued walking the trampled earth, healing those she could, comforting those that she could not. Her hands ached as she stumbled back to the main camp late that night. Rest and a good glass of wine to soothe her own pains awaited her at the small tent she called home.

Her gift was no stranger to her now, manifesting when she was young. A friend had fallen from a tree and broken his back, and as she desperately tried to help, the healing glow had sprung forth from her fingers, knitting the torn spine and flesh. She was stunned and a little frightened, but the local Temple of Tears had nurtured and encouraged her, bringing forth the powers that would help so many in the future. Under their tutelage, she worked long hours to refine and hone the skills necessary to help and heal, to comfort and stop sicknesses. She was welcomed into a warm and loving family — of sorts — who went out into the world and gave the suffering some kindness, when infirmity or plague had stripped dignity away from even the most humble souls. The Goddess of Tears was not demanding, asking only that the Healers who took her oath do what they could to ease the ills around them.

But then war had descended, bringing the sorrows and slaughter that ever followed such a plight. All the Healers felt compelled to leave safe lands



and familiar surroundings and go where the need was greatest. The lands where death stalked anew with each dawning day.

Arriving at her tent, she lay back into the bundle of hay matting that served her as a bed, stretching and working the muscles in her body. The aches and pains of exertion settled deep into her frame, augmented by the night chill. One of the side effects of using so much power in healing others was losing the power to heal yourself from injuries for a time. A small price to pay, as long as the injuries stayed in the realm of overworked muscles and bruises.

Pouring herself a half glass of wine, she set about cleaning herself of the dust and blood of the day's exertions. Aedina was a pretty Equine, her gentle face unlined except for dimples when she smiled, her muzzle soft and velveteen. She was small for her age, but strong, her muscles moving and sliding like quicksilver from the many hours spent on the road and in harsh conditions. From countless hours of manual contortions in the practice of her art, her hands were sinewy and strong, but she never failed to coax a gentle touch from them for those in need.

Finishing her grooming, she grabbed a small poker and wrestled another log into the small brazier, forcing back the cool night. She sighed happily and was ready to fill her cup and settle in for a nap, when a rapping on the doorpost caught her attention.

"Yes?"

An armored head poked through the door flap, "M'Lady Healer? The Commander requests your presence in his tent, if you are not too tired or busy?"

Aedina stood, a bit wearily, and smiled at the trooper. "I am at his service. Though please, may I borrow your arm to lean on as we walk? I'm afraid the night has set a chill in my bones."

The burly Canine all too gladly stuck a plate-mailed arm out, and she leaned heavily on it as they walked towards the commander's pavilion, torches burning brightly around it and forcing away the night. He opened the tent's flap and lead her to a padded seat, then poured some warm mulled wine and laid a blanket across her lap. She smiled thankfully for the attention as he ducked out, blushing slightly.

She was alone in the tent, so she settled comfortably into the chair and sipped at the spicy liquid. She sighed and closed her eyes in relaxation,

finally starting to feel warm. All too soon, her bliss was again interrupted, as the large Feline commander strode through the entrance of the tent, his armor gleaming in the firelight. His black-furred body was dusty from the battle, and he leaned against a map table with his back to Aedina, rubbing his eyes and sighing tiredly. The sadness and torment surrounded him like a cloud, and it didn't take her Healer's art to see it, or the iron will that doubtlessly kept him going.



Turning, he seemed not to notice her at first, then tensed and flinched when she made a small motion. When he recognized her, he relaxed and smiled in apology before bowing deferentially at the waist, and sinking into a chair across a small table from hers. "I am sorry for keeping you waiting

M'Lady, I forgot I had sent for you. We are moving out in the morning, and there is so much to do." He reached over the table and took her hand in his. She felt the calluses and scars from wielding a sword, and constant fighting. "I want to thank you for the lives of the soldiers you saved. I can't begin to say enough words for your help."

Aedina blushed deeply, as she was always wont to do with praise, "I just do what I can, Commander. It's all I have to offer."

The Feline nodded, grabbing a goblet and pouring a large amount of wine, drinking it in solid gulps. "Are you hungry?" he asked with concern, "You must be right now of course. Forgive my manners. IANTHUS! " he bellowed, causing a stir outside. The tent flap opened and a black-furred head with a broad white stripe popped through and looked around.

"Hoi Commander!"

"Have the troops eaten? Everything settled for the move tomorrow?"

"Yessir! All troops done and settled. Can I bring you anything?"

The Commander looked at Aedina with a smile, "Ianthus is a good cook — damn fine one if you ask me — and I'm sure he's got something hanging around the stoves. In fact, he usually ends up cooking far too much, and he's making us all fat!" He turned back to the stocky Badger, "Can you rustle something from the evening meal? The Healer and I are quite famished."

Ianthus nodded quickly and took off outside, the padding of booted feet fading away.

"It should only be a few minutes, Ianthus always has leftovers." The feline sighed, "Now, forgive my manners again as I still haven't told you my name, M'Lady Healer. I am Dran, and I do my best to command this bunch of roustabouts."

Aedina gave him a warm smile. "Please call me Aedina, Commander."

The craggy face softened slightly as Dran smiled back. "As you wish, though I mean only respect when I call you Healer, Aedina." He looked at her pensively. "Now, I think you are in need of provisions to see you through to the next town or encampment. If you would supply me with a list of your needs..."

"Oh, no Dran. I need little and travel light. I am sure I can make do until I reach the next community. I wouldn't dream of taking anything from your soldiers at a time like this." She fidgeted from the attention. "I thank you for your concern."

The big feline waved a hand, "Nonsense! We insist! We'll get you kitted out and I think provide an escort as well." He scowled, "These are dangerous times, Aedina. The Unclean swarm from the North and we must have a care to protect all that is valuable to us. Healers are in short supply, and may prove to be vital if we are to win this thing. There are evil things scouting for Folk of power like yourself. I cannot allow you to continue to travel alone, either in good conscience, or in my duty as a commander in a time of war."

Dran heaved himself out of the chair, grabbing a small iron bound chest and setting it heavily on the table. "You are both a treasured individual and a valued commodity." He opened it, and Aedina caught the gleam of gold and silver. His mouth moved as he counted silently to himself, then removed a small bag and set it on the table in front of her. "This will help you on the road."

"Oh, I can't take this, Dran. I can't accept any sort of payment for my service in the name of the Goddess, and it's money that would be better spent elsewhere, besides." Aedina protested, waving her hands at the bag.

Dran smiled. "Use it to feed your Ranger contingent then." He leaned out the doorway and yelled across the camp, "Sergeant! Get your troops over here!" Aedina sat stunned as seven soldiers, bristling with muscles and weaponry, marched through the tent flap and stood silently in a row. They had to duck awkwardly to stand in the confined space of the tent, as each of them was well over six feet tall. They stood at as dignified an attention as they could manage under the circumstances, as their sergeant, an even larger Ursine, saluted Dran. "Rangers present SIR!"

"At your ease. Sergeant." He turned to Aedina. "These are some of the finest trackers and fighters alive, and they have been assigned to protect you." Dran walked along the line of soldiers, looking on them with obvious pride as he continued to address Aedina. "You saved over two hundred of my troopers today; soldiers who wouldn't be alive now if not for you. Warriors like us may not have much in this world, but we look kindly on those who save our battlemates." He stopped at the sergeant and locked his gaze on the Ursine's. "All are volunteers. correct. Sergeant?"

"Yes Sir! And I had to turn away fifty more..."

Aedina sat silent, stunned at the attention. "This is far too much, Dran, I don't need a guard detail. I'm just a simple Healer..."

The big feline whuffed, "Nonsense, you have traveled alone for far too long M'Lady. The war is in full swing now, and we need to protect Folk like yourself: Healers, Mages and other valuable members of the effort. The Unclean are sending assassins or other beastly things, to track Folk like yourself down and murder them in the night. No one is safe these days, and you are no longer just a simple Healer."

Dran clapped a huge Wolf on the shoulder and turned back to smile at Aedina. "These fine Rangers will protect you to the last man, should you run afoul of devilry. I will brook no further argument on this matter." He gestured to the Sergeant. "Have your troops move the Healer's tent into the main area, re-provision her supplies, then set watch."

"Yes Commander!" The sergeant turned to his soldiers and bellowed, "You heard 'im! Move it, troops! Get it done in five!"

"YES SIR!" bellowed from seven throats as the soldiers tore out of the tent, racing to get the job done.

Dran turned, sitting down across from Aedina again, his hands toying with the half filled goblet as he talked gently to her. "Sorry to have to do this, Aedina, but the whole Southern Command knows of you and the work of the other Healers. Marshal Rituk wanted a full company of Sabres to protect you! We need every bit of luck and magic we can muster, or even the Gods themselves, on our side. We're suffering serious losses along the front. The Unclean sweep down in huge numbers from the cold wastes to the north. They pillage, murder and rape, then move on to the next town. We need every able-bodied soldier just to contain them, and for that we need you. Desperately!"

He smirked and gestured at the tent opening still knocked askew by the Rangers' passing. "Besides, do YOU want to tell them they're not wanted?"

Aedina laughed, a soft chime in the firelight, and admitted defeat. "Ah, no. You won't see me doing that. I gratefully accept your gracious insistence on my protection. I'm sure my Temple will understand, given the circumstances."

The war-weary Feline laughed along with her, his voice rich and mellow. They stared at the empty table in silence, each lost in their own thoughts of the days to come, until a rustling along the tent alerted them to dinner's arrival, Ianthus and a couple cook's helpers bundled in carrying trays. Setting them on the table, they saluted and quickly left.

Dran waved apologetically at the spread. "I'm sorry we couldn't provide better, M'Lady, but conditions in the field don't allow for much in the way of elegance. Simple and filling is the best we can hope for."

Aedina smiled and nodded. "I'm quite comfortable with the simple things in life, Commander. I thank you for sharing yours with me." She paused and looked around at the heavily laden trays, not quite sure where to begin. "There is quite a lot of it, isn't there?" She chuckled.

He chuckled and nodded in response. "Aye, that there is. I did warn you about Ianthus."

Digging into the spread laid before them, they whiled several of the nighttime hours away making small talk and talking about the war, and the future of the Lands. Aedina found herself greatly admiring the Commander's strength and obvious dedication to the soldiers under his command, and she went to sleep that night in her freshly moved tent regretting the fact that they would be parting company the next morning.



The scent of tea reached her nostrils the next morning, rousing her from a pleasant sleep on the fresh new hay they had provided for her bedding. Opening her eyes, she lay still and watched a mailed figure hunched over a small brazier within her tent, making a simple stew of meat and greens for her breakfast. Leaning up on one arm, she smiled and addressed the Ranger.

"Good morning."

He turned quickly, obviously surprised. "M'Lady! I am sorry I woke you. I thought I was being quiet."

"You were. It was the smell of that wonderful tea which disturbed my rest, and I certainly don't mind that. May I please have some?"

He hastened to fill a mug, pushing some of the stew onto a plate as well. He passed the plate and the cup to the sleepy Aedina and smiled crookedly. "It's a simple meal, M'Lady, I'm no great cook, I'm afraid."

Aedina took a spoonful and nodded appreciatively, drinking the tea quickly and barely taking time between spoonfuls of breakfast. "You should give yourself more credit. This is very good!"

"My Ma showed me when I was younger. She taught me a few things afore I was called to duty."

"Your mother must have been a fine lady, she taught you well." She smiled around a mouthful of food.

He focused his eyes on the ground, unsure of what to say. Aedina changed the subject to more familiar ground for him. "May I ask how I got to my bed?"

He brightened. "Aye! The Commander carried you back here himself after you fell asleep at the table, M'Lady. He gave orders that you were not be disturbed until you had enough rest."

She set the empty plate and mug aside and nodded, "Will you please tell him thank you for me?"

"Sorry M'Lady. He had orders to take his squad to the East, and moved out this morning while you rested. I don't know if we'll run into him again." Taking the empty breakfast dishes, he bowed slightly and left the tent so the Healer could complete her morning routine.

Aedina sat in the still warm hay for a bit, thinking about Dran and wishing for fair weather and luck for him and those under his command. She knew he had a dangerous job to do — protecting the Folk from the encroaching armies of the Unclean — and that he would gladly give his life in service to the land. Still, that didn't mean things always had to turn out that way.

She snorted to herself. You have a job to do too, and it won't get done lounging in bed! Aedina struggled to rise from the bedding and walked to the basin and ewer to freshen up, splashing the cold water on her face and muzzle. Shrugging on her robes, she exited the warm tent, a chill breeze slipping across her face.

Her new escorts were chatting among themselves around the wagon, so she walked over to greet them. Two huge striped Highland Wolves were joking and sparring with three Desert Felines who had markings almost like a jungle Tiger's, but were thinner and by all accounts quite a bit faster. The Ursine Sergeant stood off to one side, conversing quietly with a black and tan canine. His nose whuffed as he sniffed the air, turning to watch her approach.

He must have alerted the Sergeant to her presence, as the big bear turned around and smiled broadly. "Good morning M'Lady! We're ready to depart when you are, as soon as the lads have a minute to stow your tent. We've got all your other gear already packed in the wagon, and the cart beasts hitched up and ready to travel."

"Very good Sergeant. Thank you. Your crew may break down the tent whenever they are ready." The bear gestured to the lounging Rangers, and as they walked off, she turned to speak to him privately. "Sergeant, a favor please?"

"Yes M'Lady, of course!"

"I'm not used to having a squad of soldiers around me, and I'm certainly not used to being called M'Lady all the time. I'll do my best to adjust to you, if you do me the favor of asking your men to please call me Aedina." She smiled. "I'm not much for being deferred to all the time."

He rubbed a scarred hand against his muzzle and thought for a moment. "It'll take us all a little time to get used to that, Ma'am, but I promise you we'll do our best. Aedina..." He nodded and moved off to oversee the last of the packing operation.

In what seemed like no time at all they were done, and two of the soldiers helped her up onto the wagon's seat next to one of the lithe Desert Cats with a heavy crossbow cradled in his arms. The driver paced the cart at a fast trot, which the Rangers had no trouble keeping up with, being used to long running marches. They talked and joked among themselves easily.

Aedina turned to the cat sitting silent beside her. "Well, Ranger, what is your name? I can't sit beside someone for this entire trip without knowing who they are."

The dusky face turned towards her, "Well ma'am," he paused, "I'm sorry, the Sergeant said to call you Aedina. Well Aedina, I'm Hadrin, Yarin's son."

She lay a gentle hand on his rock hard forearm. "Well then Hadrin, what shall we talk about?"

He remained silent, thinking. A voice from one of the marchers shouted out. "Hey! How about a marching song?"

The rest of the squad piped up, whistling and cheering for a song. Urtim, a Highlander, raised his voice above the din and launched into one of the songs of his clan. He sang a story of bravery and courage; of the Battle of Marih, a river on the northern edge of the highland nations. There, a handful of Clansfolk fought to hold back a tide of evil Unclean, protecting the pass which led to unsuspecting villages until relief could be summoned. When the army arrived days later, they found only twenty soldiers remaining, standing among the bodies of thousands of the Unclean. It was sung as a testament to the bravery of the highland folk, and Urtim sang it well.



Aedina clapped when the dark Wolf had finished, whistling and cheering along with his comrades. She had heard the song many times before, but the situation at hand made it all the more real and she found herself thinking on it more than before. The bravery of so few against so many would always touch hearts and minds, but how could a handful of even the most dedicated soldiers find the courage or the means to do so? Where does one have to reach to summon that kind of fire?

Their destination was a war camp of the Highlands Clan, set to guard a clear pass through the Erudee Mountains. It was initially naught but an outpost fort, meant to monitor the activity of their ancient enemy and repel the occasional recon patrol. However, now the Unclean were reported to be massing heavily at this particular point; an easy route into the farms and villages that sat in the valleys below the tall mountain peaks. War seemed inevitable, and every available Healer would be needed. The situation seemed not unlike Urtim's battle song, only this time there would be a lot more ClansFolk. And a lot more of the Unclean.

The very spot had seen battle many times before, in fact. The most famous now lurked only in half-songs and snippets of verbal accounts, having taken place hundreds of years before the present day. It was said that when the armies of the Unclean came from the North that time, they had the assistance of beings of great power and malevolence the like of which had never been seen before, or since. When the armies of the Kingdom and Highlands brought their own power to bear, the energies expended were said to have turned the very soil to glass.

It was uncertain how much real truth was contained in the tales however. There were no reliable accounts from a time so long ago, and hardly a visible trace could be found in the hills and valleys around Erudee. It was true that the area was relatively void of natural vegetation, but that was more likely due to a harsh and unforgiving climate than to the after effects of an epic battle.

The pass, and the impending battle, was still a couple days away though, and with good roads, bright skies, and relatively mild weather, little darkened the spirits of Aedina or her band of Rangers. The first day of travel passed quickly and without incident and they stopped and set up camp beneath tall, ancient oaks and thorn a little way from the roadside. The group of soldiers quickly and efficiently got a fire going and set up camp,

finishing the day's chores and setting a watch schedule before sitting beside the warm flames massaging sore feet and bones.

Aedina, feeling more than a little useless in the face of such organization and hard work, quickly offered to lend a bit of comfort, but was waved away by the Sergeant.

"If they grow to depend on your healing skills all the time, they'll lose their edge. Sometimes that is all that stands between a man and death out there on the battlefield. Save your formidable skills for those in dire need of it, and let the aches and pains toughen our hides." He smiled, "Though your offer is most gracious and appreciated."

She smiled and nestled close to the fire. Her bones were chilled and, truth be told, she rather looked forward to the next few days of not having to fend for herself so much. Sure, she had initially protested but now she was looking forward to the company of the soldiers.

The canine trooper, whose name she had learned was Brinal, suddenly stiffened imperceptibly and leaned over to whisper in the bear's ear. "Sarge, we've got company." At a gesture from their leader, steel slid silently and gently from sheaths, the troopers moving slowly into a circle facing outwards with Aedina at its center.

Aedina heard the Sergeant whisper to her, "There is evil in the woods. Stay where you are, Aedina, and make no sign of having noticing anything." She looked around and saw that she was alone, the squad having disappeared into the trees soundlessly. She pulled her robes together in front of her chilled body, trying to drink a cup of tea as slowly and nonchalantly as her hammering heart allowed. A rustling in the bushes nearby spoke of something approaching; the hairs on her neck standing up from the almost palpable waves of evil swept in along the breeze.

She felt — no, she KNEW — something was standing behind her. Turning slowly around, she stared into the dark inky blackness that were the eyes of the demon-spawned Unclean. It raised a blade, dripping with venom, as it hissed through a misshapen mouth. "Die now Healer."

She fell backwards beside the fire in terror, raising a hand in a desperate attempt at self-defense as the blade swung down, only to be stopped by a sword wielded by one of the Rangers. She gasped for breath and scrambled closer to the fire and out of the way of the charge. Her soldiers were back!

Steel glimmered and flashed in the firelight, the big Sergeant grunting with the impacts as he drove the demon away from Aedina. Screams and terrible wails cut through the night as the Rangers tore into their foe. There were more than the one that had tried to kill her directly, but how many she couldn't tell.

The squad collapsed around her and back into the circle formation, glinting Kingdom steel meeting the black iron of the enemy in a whirl of deadly action. Working in concert as they plunged their swords into the fell flesh of the attackers, Aedina couldn't decide whether to be relieved or horrified. Howls came from the muzzles of Rangers who had sung happy marching songs not hours before as they now hacked and slew the misshapen foes.

They were in Battle Lust. Lost in the bestial nature of their own blood song, they gave in to the violence, the anger, the hatred. It protected home and hearth during the direst of times, and it protected her now.

She watched the Desert Cats, lithe and cunning as they snarled and danced around one another, keeping foes at bay with spinning, shimmering scimitars. Their armor slid along their hard muscled bodies as they leapt and twisted around each other, one slashing and cutting from below, while the other lay cuts at the same foe from above. In another part of the clearing, the big ursine Sergeant was roaring his anger, his thick arms wielding a two handed sword with the ease of a child playing with a stick. A single swing would cleave a foe from crown to groin, another, separate one into two equal halves with a swipe under the ribcage.

A sword caught one of the Highlanders in the side. She heard and felt the tear in the chainmail and flesh and tried to rush to his side as she saw him fall, but was yelled back by the trooper that stood over his friend, slashing and cutting away with the deadly barbed swords the highlands folk carried. Her heart ached for the wounded soldier, her soldier, but she knew rationally that she would only be in the way. She was used to cleaning up after battles, not being present in the middle of them!

A hand pushed her roughly aside, forcing her to the ground. Brinal stood above her, blocking an axe that had been aimed for her head, taking the blow on his pauldrons. "Get DOWN Aedina," he cried, snarling at the power of the hit and returning it with vigor. She saw he used a spear, a wide bladed affair with a crossbar below the leaf-shaped tip. Raising his arms over his head, he slammed the heavy blade into the Unclean soldier's chest,

forcing it back down to the ground and impaling it in the dirt. With a final twist and roar, he yanked it out and straddled Aedina's prone form, making sure he kept the ebb and flow of battle away from her.

Peering out from underneath Brinal, she watched as the rangers gained the upper hand, slowly but surely driving the evil things back into the woods, or into whatever passed for eternity for their kind. There was no quarter given. The Unclean killed mindlessly, and the Rangers were only too happy to return it.

Finally it fell quiet, leaving only a roaring in her ears from the noise and shouting, and a forest clearing littered with dark bodies and ichor. She blinked the dust from her eyes and peered around the campsite, watching the Rangers methodically cutting the throats or severing the heads clean off any fallen enemy they could find. It was more than just a final violent action borne of hatred. The Unclean had a habit of faking death to take their otherwise victorious foes by surprise, springing up and attacking anew while the wounded were being tended to.

Aedina sat up shakily, absently brushing dirt off her robes as the full impact hit her. They were really after her! No one else, but her. And they would have succeeded had the soldiers not been there. They were at war, for real. The implications for herself and the land she loved were starting to sink in.

She shook her head, rising unsteadily. She was needed here and now. There would be time for analysis later. She sought out the soldier she had seen wounded grievously. It was Flinra, and he lay gasping off to the side, his sword lying useless in the scuffed up dirt of the battle. His side was split open pretty badly, gaping and dripping with infection from the envenomed blades the Unclean carried. He looked up at her and grinned a bit crookedly.

"Weel Lass, seems I missed one now, aye?"

Aedina smiled and fell into her element easily. "All will be taken care of. Just rest now Flinra." She smiled and laid her hands softly along the oozing wound, feeling the power flow from deep within her. She knew just how to guide it to bring the blood borne infection to bay, then wipe it out at the source before knitting the torn flesh and organs together once more. She sat back, watching the glow fade and leave only a slight pink scar where there had once been a gaping hole. His breathing was slow and regular now, all traces of the pain and infection gone, and his body simply resting from the exertion.

She sat on her haunches and looked around for anyone else that might need her help and saw them bandaging the minor wounds they all seemed to have, wrapping clean linens on them. Their breath came in heavy, winded gasps from the fighting, and a couple sat on the ground trying to catch a breath while wrapping their wounds. Thankfully though, none of them seemed to be as badly hurt as Flinra had been. She called out, "Anyone else? Is there anyone else I can help? No venom?"

In turn, they shook their heads, and Aedina turned back to Flinra who was, feeling his side.

"By th' gods lass, I swear I ne'er felt the like! Aye, and I'll be making donations regularly at this temple of yers!"

Aedina chuckled and patted the callused hand, "Oh, no need to do that, maybe just think of the temple at the yearly festival?"

"Aye I will! By gods! I feel young and new agin!"

He joined the others, who with wounds wrapped, turned to moving the dead off into the woods away from the camp. She helped as best she could, reassembling their things which had been trampled and strewn about the camp in the running fight. The watch was increased by several men as the rest finally sat down by the fire, no longer talking much and individually pondering the fact that they were being tracked. The party that had attacked them was too small to have been anything more than a probe of their defenses, and next time they would be greater in numbers and fight with even more determination. None of them would be safe until they made the outpost several days later, and they were increasingly unsure any of them would be safe even then.



The days passed and the tall, windswept peaks of the Erudee Mountains grew ever closer. They had been ever watchful since the attack, traveling as they were through low-lying areas which seemed perfect for an ambush. The enemy surprised them yet again however, remaining quiet and elusive — though they never doubted that their entire party was being watched carefully the entire time.

Their early casual mood never quite returned, though as the days wore on they tended to talk and joke more again. The experience had changed all of

them a little bit, reminding the Rangers of their own mortality and the increasing likelihood that they would never see their homes or families again. Aedina had been awakened to the shocking reality of that which she was traveling towards, and the growing fear that she would be unprepared for it. Together, the band had grown into somewhat of a family on the road; less unsure of themselves and their places in the group.

So it was with somewhat of mixed feeling that, as they entered a low plain with the winds coming off the mountains cool and crisp, they saw the distant cookfires of the fort. They knew that the casual companionship would be lacking amidst the hustle and bustle of the crowded outpost, but also that warmer beds and hot meals would be there too. The latter won out, and they increased their pace in the hopes of reaching the secure walls before nightfall.

Aedina looked down at the Sergeant jogging along easily beside the wagon. "Sergeant, it occurs to me that even after all this time, I still don't know your name. Would you share it with me so that I know whom to speak highly of when we reach the fort?"

He laughed, a rumbling that came from deep within his chest. "I've been called Sergeant for so long Aedina, that it might as well be my name — but if you want to know, it's Eclides, named after the..."

She laughed. "The famous philosopher! Oh my, I would never have guessed, but it suits you, Eclides."

He smiled, waving the comment off as he hustled forward to lead the Rangers into the fort.

The gates were surrounded by palisades of sharpened and tarred wood, which helped prevent the outer walls from being set afire or scaled by enemies. The guards on the wall halted their advance, and Eclides approached to state the details of their journey. Satisfied, the highland guards hailed for the gates to be opened and waved the little party through quickly.

The Commander of the fort was called to greet them personally; probably the largest Wolf any one of them had ever seen. He dwarfed even the Sergeant and his Rangers! His fur was a dark gray striped with white, and a patch covered his left eye, but didn't conceal a massive scar that ran from his torn ear, across his face, down the thick neck, and ending at his shoulder. His massive hands were callused and hard from years of war, his arms like

bars of iron as he gripped each of their hands in turn. He moved with the grace of a panther, but with a ferocious undercurrent of death itself.

He motioned to Aedina. "I understand ya tae be tired and all after yer journey, but we have immediate use for your healing skills, if ye not too troubled."

The little equine smiled winningly up at the Clanwolf Commander. "If you could see my things inside Commander, I would be happy to help right now." She moved off towards the hospital building, chuckling as she heard the commander bellow out to his soldiers. "Aye! Sub-Commander! Get ye here with a squad an' be taking these good soldiers things inside and stowed if ye would?"



Entering the wooden building, it was the smell that hit her first, her nostrils flaring at the reeking stench of venom and infected wounds. Her hands clenched and unclenched slowly as she headed over to the first bed in line, which contained a trooper, who couldn't be more than eighteen summers. Stroking his fevered brow and laying a gentle hand along his side

where the bandage leaked pus and fluids, she spoke to him in soothing tones. "Rest soldier, all will be well..."



The sun had set by the time she wandered out of the building, her body aching from the use of more power than she had in a long time. The wounds inflicted had been very bad, and resisted all but the most determined healing, but she felt good for having helped so many. No matter the cost.

Nothing that a good cup of tea and a night's rest won't solve, she thought; looking around for her tent. She was about to hunt down the Commander and ask when she heard a familiar voice behind her.

"So little Healer, made it to the camp all right I see."

She spun, surprised. "Dran!" She gave the big cat a friendly embrace, glad to see him safe and sound. "I thought you had headed East?"

Dran chuckled, holding her briefly before letting her go and stepping back slightly. "Oh, well it seems the highlanders here had more than they could handle, so we got orders to march for the fort. So we ended up here with this bunch of rogues."

"ROGUES? Why I'll show ye rogues ye dandy!" The big wolf strode over to them. Aedina remembered hearing others in the hospital refer to him as Trema.

He waved a huge hand at Dran, "Here I give him food and shelter and some of the best lodgings around, and he calls us Rogues, BAH!"

Dran laughed, nodding and holding his hands up in surrender, "Down, Trema, down. Fight the Unclean not me. I was just teasing!"

"Aye, I'll give ya jesting, ya dandy cat, bah, rogues indeed." He winked at Aedina as he stalked off, bellowing orders to the guards along the walls.

Aedina shook her head and smiled. "Well, it seems you made a good first impression on Trema. Think you can fix it?"

"Oh, he's just bluffing and you know it. However, his soldiers are the fiercest fighters this side of the Marih River, and he's a good commander. The clans around here respect him a lot. But enough of this! If I remember, you have a fondness for hot tea. Let's go find some for you!" He took her arm in his and they walked together to where his army was camped inside the long walls. Greetings were passed all around as the soldiers cheered



Aedina, and food was passed to her immediately. Dran made his excuses and left to check on some things, promising to be back shortly.

Eclides sat down beside her as she ate. "We've been told that the Unclean will probably be making a push through here soon. They've failed to the East, where they got fought to a standstill by the Kingdom armies." He eyed the walls and the many soldiers that stood on the palisades, looking towards the pass.

One of the highlanders among their group heard Eclides talking and chimed in, "Aye, but let them demon spawn come through and we'll show them what good solid Clan's steel will do!" He raised the barbed sword above his head and gave a chilling cry which others along the walls copied, the sounds echoing off the mountains above them.

Dran and Trema came along after, joining the circle around the fire. The big Wolf looked to Dran and nodded. The cat cleared his throat and started to talk. "Orders are simple. Hold this pass." He drew mountains in the dirt, followed by the river that ran between them and below the fort. "There are only three places where the Erudees are passable. The Kingdom armies have been holding one to the East for the last two weeks. The Unclean are growing weary of the impasse, and are casting around for another way through."

"The second one is blocked with snow and ice most of the year, and they'd have to wait nearly five months to get through that one. The third is right here. We hold this pass, and the Unclean can't come back to try again until Spring. By then we'll have been able to deploy further forts and troops along the three lines, and will be able to keep them bottled up in the North until we can find a way to defeat them once and for all. Intelligence says that they're massing for an attack any day now, which means we're on our own. There'll be no more reinforcements."

He scuffed absently at the drawing and sat for a moment staring into the fire, until slapping his mailed knees, he got up and stretched. "Get yer rest! Tomorrow we begin the waiting game, lads!" With that, he walked away to his own tent, obviously desiring to be alone. Shortly after, the rest of the troop wandered off as well, silent and lost in their own thoughts and staring towards the mountains.



The next morning, as Aedina and her guards washed up and prepared for the long day, a scout from one of the towers started yelling and gesturing frantically towards the pass.

"Looks like something's stirring things up out there! We got movement in the pass!"

"Arms!" Eclides and the other officers began mobilizing the compound, "Arms, troopers! Armor up and get to yer posts!"

The fort came to life. Soldiers scrambled to grab weapons and armor, then worked to ready ballista and catapults as the dark mass moved over the horizon and down through the pass. Aedina went straight to the hospital, which was both the safest and most useful place for her and the other Healers and Mages to wait out the battle. Part of her squad remained outside the building, guarding the entrances from any approach.

Trema and Dran stood atop the palisades, giving direction to the mass of soldiery under their command.

"Yarm! Bring them javelins out!"

"Get those arrows over to th' archers! Move it!"

"Swing them ballista around! We'll show em what th' Clans are made of!"

Trema leaned against the sharpened logs of the wall, staring with his good eye out over the black mass of Unclean coming through the snowy pass. He could see wagons with logs and lumber for siege engines, a baggage train that meandered back towards the horizon.

He gestured to Dran and rubbed his scarred muzzle, "Weel, looks like they're settin' in for a siege."

Dran nodded and squinted. "Aye. We've got the high ground here though, and they have to fight up from the river. Siege or no, we're still in good shape."

They turned back to watching the evil things marching down the rocky mountain pass, when a sharp-eyed feline among the watch shouted, "Shifters!! They have Shifters!!"

The assembled troops stirred nervously, though the development was hardly unexpected. Shifters were among the deadliest of the many forms of little demons, able to change shape at will to easily overcome most physical defenses. Give them a wall, and they'll climb it. Failing that, they'll tunnel under it quicker than you could respond.

"Alright, be calm, ye!" Trema yelled. "Get the healers and noncombatants to the safe rooms. Soldiers stand yer ground!"

The safe rooms were underground bunkers lined with carefully fitted stone in multiple layers which prevented Shifters from digging through. The doors and windows were heavily barred and provided with arrow slits for defense. They also served as a secure access point to the upper ballista towers, with stairs winding upwards. Aedina and the other doctors and mages were hustled inside the stout walls, and her Ranger guard took up positions around the room and just outside.

Aedina couldn't take being locked up in the dark when she felt she might be able to be of some use, so she ran up the stairs and joined the ballista crew, over the protests of her guards. They insisted on following to keep an eye on her, much to the annoyance of the increasingly cramped ballista crew.

Aedina leaned out over the edge, taking in as much of the battle scene as she could. She was certain that the more she could see and understand what was going on, the more she could be of help in the coming hours and days.

A bugle sounded from the ranks of the Unclean, blaring over the walls as the soldiers watched the black mass of demons and soldiers that were once human assemble in lines. Shifting and moving like liquid tar, it was a blot of darkness on the pure white snow of the pass. A scream ran out along the massed ranks of Unclean, spurring them to action as they splashed across the freezing river, running up the slope to slam into the walls of the fortress.

Immediately they met with a hail of arrows and javelins launched with unerring accuracy by the soldiers along the walls. The lead ranks falling like lightning struck trees, their comrades ran over them, trampling them into the ground as they pushed on towards the fort. Aedina was aghast that even as evil as they were, they would treat their own with such callous disregard.

All four sides of the fort were active, the tide of enemy washing around and against the walls like a flood tide. She could hear the bodies slamming into the walls, their claws and weapons levied against the timbers, trying to tear the fort apart. The occasional misshapen heads poked up over the parapets, only to be lopped off by the sword of one of the defenders. Only to be replaced by another thing trying to scale the wall and gain access to the interior of the fortress. The catapult operators and archers launched storm after storm of stones and arrows into the seething crowd as fast as they could reload, but still the tide kept coming.

Seeing the first soldiers being carried off the walls wounded, she rushed down the stairs. A burly trooper stopped her at the barred door.

"Hold it, where ye think ye're going?"

"I have to help, I'm a Healer!"

"Commanders orders, no one outside till the fighting dies down, M'Lady, I'm sorry."

"But those are YOUR comrades out there, hurt and dying! What good do I do anyone stuck behind a barred door while they suffer? Please, please let me help!"

The big feline thought for a moment. "Alright, I'll get me head taken off for this, but let's go M'Lady. I'll escort you to the hospital building."

Cautiously, the soldier opened the door and peered out, waiting until he was certain the courtyard was clear. Motioning several others to follow, he guided Aedina out the door, followed by the other Healers, some of the Mages and her Rangers, providing some additional cover. The entire band made it to the hospital building unmolested, the fort regulars returning to their duties, while Aedina's Rangers took up positions outside. Aedina and the other Healers set to work immediately, directing the chaos of the hospital as masterfully as Dran and Trema directed the battle raging outside.

She went from trooper to trooper, administering her gentle touch and healing them as fast as she could. She said prayers for the dead and dying and said blessings for the healed, who invariably thanked her, grabbed their weapons and re-joined the lines. She quickly grew tired from drawing too much power too quickly, but even when she could deploy no more power to help, she carried on tending to the injured in more mundane ways. What felt like days was only hours, and still the battle raged outside. During the moments when she could catch a break, she stood at the door and watched what little flow of battle she could still see. Soldiers screamed for water, food, and arrows. Machine crews staggered to the commissary, gasping for breath and gulping down food as fast as they could before dashing back to swing their ballista back into action.

The flow had turned against each side more than once, but been beaten back into equality, paid for in blood. She saw Trema yank an arrow out of his shoulder then strike at an unseen foe. His body wavered, then crumpled along the parapet, a sub-commander grabbing him and dragging him to safety. The wound was bandaged quickly by field units, who told the big

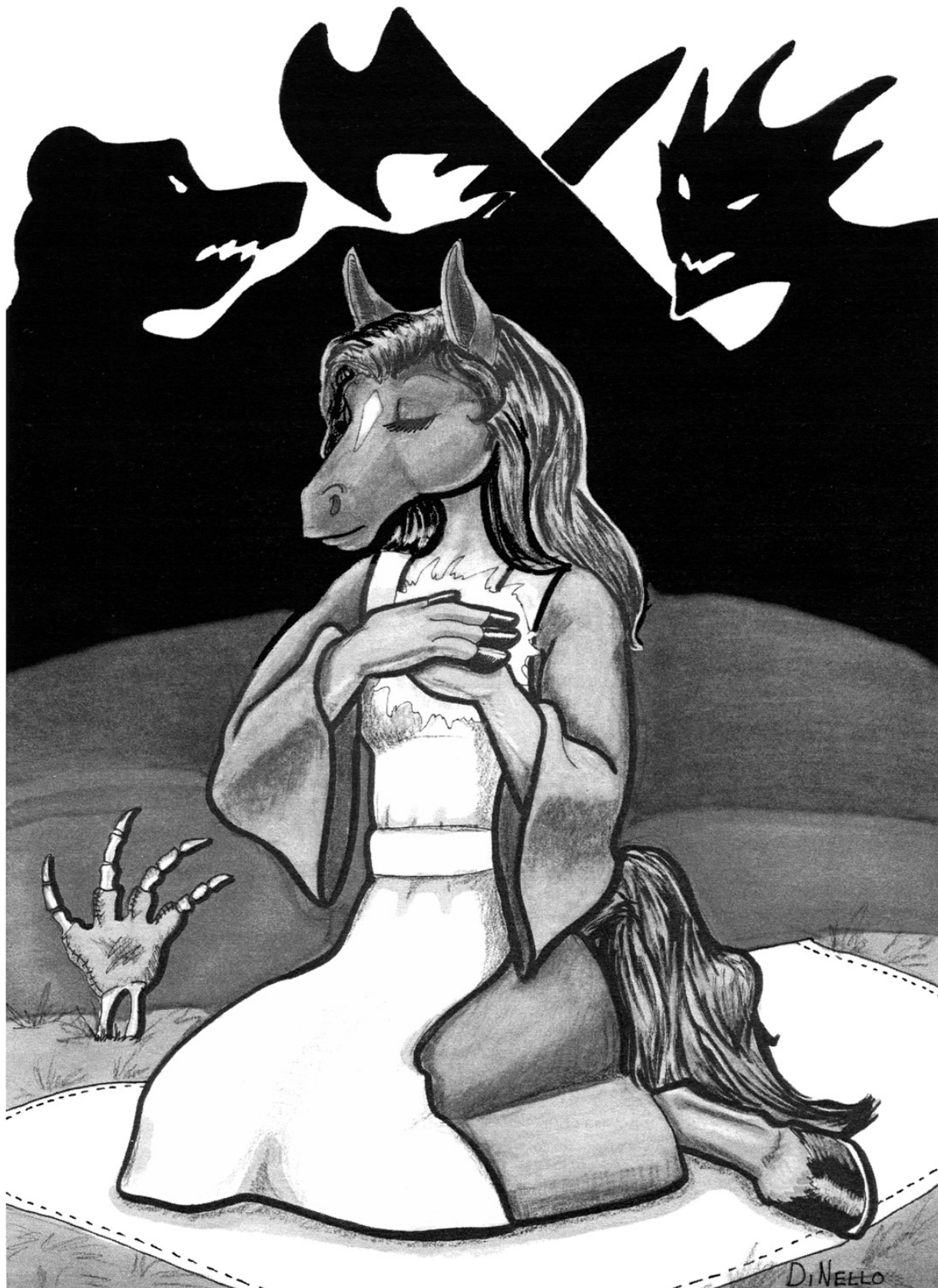
wolf he wasn't to go back until rested. He ignored them, of course. The numbers on the walls were dwindling, and the soldiers were exhausted, sometimes barely able to stay awake as they left the lines to grab something to eat or drink. Torches lit the night attacks, as the Unclean gave the warriors inside no respite. The might of numbers was on their side, and they knew the fort would eventually fall. The soldiers knew it too, and it was with no significant lifting of their spirits that they saw the sun once again break over the horizon after the long night.

The war machines had run out of ammunition during the night, so their crews had joined the others on the walls. Some of the Mages had gone into action, slamming fire and lightning into their foes, only to be brought down when smothered by mobs of gibbering things. Others used their power sparingly and from safer locations, hoping to reserve the bulk of their power for use as a last resort defense.

Both Trema and Dran continued to try to bolster the spirits of their soldiers, covered as they both were with countless small wounds and cuts. Trema's hands clenched behind his back as he howled his frustration to the sky. He stood on the parapet, his sword held high in silent challenge to the evil before them. Dran joined him from his position in a tower, holding his sword high in one hand as he lifted his helmet off and let it drop, the black mane flowing in the breeze that swept around them, chill and crisp. He looked back at what was left of his troopers, and they stared back with an equal ferocity. They were Clans, they were Kingdom, and they would fight till the last. Spirits soared, knowing that whatever came, they had done their best.

Aedina could do nothing, and her heart broke to see the two commanders preparing to enjoin their final battle. She worried not for herself, though she was certainly in immediate peril like everyone else at the fort, but for the countless Rangers and Clansmen who would never see the next day's sunrise. She could do nothing more for them, so she prayed.

Spreading a blanket, she knelt upon it, looking up into the clear blue sky and praying as she never had before. With her eyes closed, she whispered and murmured the Litanies of the Tear, asking for help; pleading with her patron to spare the lives of these good soldiers who were just trying to defend their homes and families. Everything went silent suddenly, and her eyes popped open to a world gone still—soldiers stopped in mid-swing. Unclean poised in midair.



Was she dead? Did a Shifter grab her while she prayed?

"No, dear Priestess of mine. I have heard the call of your heart."

Aedina turned and immediately sank to her knees, brushing her forehead to the ground in silent piety. A silvery hand reached forward and tugged her arm, encouraging her to stand before the Goddess of Tears. Her eyes glimmered with love and boundless goodwill. Her body was wrapped in clothes of spun gold and silver, which shimmered in the morning sun. "Do not bow to me, dear Priestess. I am your patron, you are mine, and for the moment we are one. I have heard your call, and know your motives to be pure."

Aedina gaped and nodded slowly, afraid to say anything at all.

The Goddess laughed; delicate glass bells on spun silver wire. "Would you have preferred I not answer? That I not help when one of mine own call to me in a time of direst need?" She smiled, bright and glowing. "Nay, I am not petty, nor as selfish as some others. The evil here must not win this time, and though I am prevented from intervening directly, you may intervene for me." She took Aedina's hand in hers, an object passing between them. "Take this and use it in my name to turn the tide. However, nothing comes without a price, and you will see for yourself what is required of you in return."

The Goddess of Tears smiled and began to fade slowly away. "You are a force of good in this world, and dear to my heart. Farewell, Aedina."

Aedina looked down, seeing a shining, diamond tear lying in her hand.

The world started turning again, the screams and howls of dying soldiers everywhere as the Unclean started their last desperate push. Aedina didn't know exactly what she was supposed to do with the gift, so she kneeled again and prayed with all her heart. Holding the teardrop over her heart with both hands, she recited the Litanies over and over, feeling a growing warmth steal over her small frame, the power growing ever stronger. It wasn't the warm familiar sensation of her Healing power though; this was far different, and Aedina gasped at the surge, throwing herself palms-forward to the ground.

The power that had built up inside her began to drain away into the earth, spreading and feeding... something. Minutes passed and the battle continued to surge forth over the walls, the soldiers falling back inch by inch. She barely noticed them running past her as she opened her mind and soul to the power. Suddenly it stopped. She blinked, shaking her head and

looking around as the mass of Unclean closed in on her and the soldiers fighting around her. Did I do it wrong? Have I failed after all?

The earth shook in answer. It trembled so hard that soldiers and Unclean alike had trouble standing as cracks appeared, the soil heaving and steaming as it groaned and shrieked from the stresses. Then it stopped, again becoming still as both sides raised weapons, preparing for their final charge when a Kingdoms' soldier screamed, "Look!"

All watched in shock as a bony hand forced its way out of the ground; fleshless bones, aged and yellowed from centuries in the ground, twisted and wormed their way out of the now soft soil. It was followed by another hand, sword held firm in the undead bones, which gripped the ground and heaved the rest of the skeleton upwards in a shower of dirt and mud. It wore armor of a design not seen in centuries, with a sword rusted and bare but still sharp and deadly.

The Unclean cheered, seeing one of their own, as the soldiers near Aedina groaned in horror, seeing their own deaths in the grinning skull. Its eyes locked on Aedina, and the scrape of rusted armor followed as it started to move towards her, stopping several yards away to stare at her for an eternity of moments. Abruptly it turned to face the gibbering horde of evil. It raised its skeletal arms and gave a terrible howl, making the ground rumble again as thousands of skeletal hands broke the surface inside and outside the fort, forcing their way up out of the groaning soil to stand in massed ranks.

Dran and Trema stepped to the front of the massed Folk, readying their swords and bellowing orders. "Fall in! We'll give em what for!"

Aedina watched, horrified. The dead now rising out of the ground had walked this same battlefield centuries ago. The first had spoken to her, whispering in her mind and demanding to know why they had been forced from their rest to serve again. She had responded. Because you are needed. Because again you can protect these lands and these people. Because even death is no match for your bravery.

Now she saw thousands more rising up from the ground, forcing their way up to stand in rank upon rank of glowing-eyed skeletons. They stood unmoving as her heart hammered, their whispering voices magnified in her mind a thousand fold. She clenched her hands around her ears, "Stop! Stop it! I can't take it..." Trema was nearby and caught her as she fell back to the ground, clutching the diamond in her hand. "Stop it, just help these folk! Stop whispering in my mind!"



A scream ripped through the air as the undead launched into the midst of the Unclean soldiers, hacking them down as they stood amazed at what they had thought were allies turning to enemies in the blink of an eye.

The voices silent now, Aedina recovered quickly and ran for the safe room and up the tower stairs, the two commanders hot on her heels. Climbing out onto the top, she leaned over the side and whinnied in awe and fear. The ranks of skeletal forms were mauling the enemy, biting, hacking, slashing or just ripping apart the Unclean troops. Banners flapped in the breeze, tattered and worn as they bore down on the enemy. Silent skeletal cavalry swept down from the surrounding hills, their sabers hacking and maiming the enemy and the riding beasts trampling anything underfoot as they swept through. Never tiring, never stopping.

The battlefield was eerily silent, the only screams now coming from the enemy as they tenaciously charged the skeletal army again and again, blind to their losses. The Clans and soldiers of the Kingdoms had re-joined the battle now too, clashing steel alongside their long dead brethren. Together they fought, and the tide was turned easily. Aedina was aghast at what she had brought forth into the world, and at the terrible ferocity with which they had done her bidding. Her bidding. Her battle. Were her motives good enough to have caused this? Was this what the Goddess had intended?

She shook her head and turned away from the battle, walking down the stairs in a daze and heading for the hospital. The voices in her head had ceased once the army had their orders, so Aedina forced herself back to healing the injured from the morning's near-final rush. Her duty lay there. Even with the might brought to bear against the Unclean, the battle raged on for hours, and there were plenty of casualties. As the day wore on into evening though, it had grown steadily quieter.

Lost in thought, she almost missed the silence until she noticed the doctors and Mages gathering near the door. Finishing up with her patient, she strode to the door and looked out into the courtyard, gasping. The undead commander was standing at the gates with as much of his army as would fit behind him. His eyes blazed as he sought her out, nodding and whispering in her mind. The threat is over. Let us go.

She gathered her courage around her like a cloak and walked out into the light of the setting sun, feeling the eyes of the thousands of skeletal warriors fixed on her, burning into her soul. She did not fear them, but feared what they meant, and feared what she had become. She was still Aedina, the

Healer, but now there was something more. The power she had deployed in bringing them to bear had darkened her soul just a little.

Of more immediate concern was the fact that she had no clue how to send the soldiers back to their graves.

She looked down at the diamond tear in her hand as she walked up to the undead commander and stared into the deep flames of his eyes. She spoke, as much to those she had awakened, as to herself. "We cry, we Healers of the Tears... We cry whenever a death comes upon us or someone we are near. It is the Goddess' way of helping those souls cross over and be at rest." She stared upwards into the skull's eyes, watching it as closely as it watched her. "Perhaps one of the things I have needed to learn is that death is not an end, but a change."

"Today, you have crossed back over at my bidding to save the lives of everyone here, and hundreds of thousands of others throughout the land. You were never forgotten after your first act of bravery at the Marih River, and you will now be remembered a hundredfold. Be at rest now, and our eternal gratitude go with you."

She reached up, one hand wrapped around the diamond as her other stroked along the skull's hard cheek, watching as it crumbled into dust before her. A sigh escaped into the wind as the soul was released back from whence it had come. Tears flowed freely down Aedina's face. Tears of gratitude.

She walked along the ranks and rows, sending the brave souls back home and always, as ever she had, softly she touched.



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**What if you could tell your story?**

## HISTORIMORPHS

**Edited by Lanny Fields**



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"Hey," the cat said, her ears folding back, her arms still around the mouse. "This isn't just some random hit, y'know. We've got good reasons for—"

Midge cut her off with a growl. "I've heard every reason there is. Now, who do you want me to kill?"

Tonio did some more swallowing—good; at least he had the decency to look uncomfortable when hiring an assassin.

Kylene Christine Miles 2001